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Become a volunteer urban forester

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Pam Holy and George Davis headed out of the little slice of butterfly heaven that is the Burnham Nature Sanctuary, Davis holding a pruner and Holy lugging industrial-grade limb loppers in a bucket.

Along the trail behind them was evidence of the morning's accomplishments: Piles of brush made up of invasive buckthorn that had just been removed by Holy and Davis, the site's stewards, and a band of hardworking volunteers from Chicago Cares.

Workdays like this have helped turn this patch of land at 47th Street and Lake Shore Drive into a rich trove of nature. The prairie grasses are more than head-high, and the sunflowers tower over them. Birds swoop in and out, butterflies flutter and you can't take a step without seeing grasshoppers, bees and high-flying dragonflies.

Holy and Davis weren't tending trees last Saturday. But they frequently do so in their volunteer work, because they are TreeKeepers.

TreeKeepers are graduates of a seven-week class that teaches ordinary people how to become volunteer urban foresters. They are the only volunteers in the city allowed to plant and maintain trees on city, park and forest preserve land.

TreeKeepers maintain the small trees the city and park district plant but lack the manpower to care for, said Jim DeHorn, the program's organizer. They do "all that fussy little pruning" professionals can't get to.

Their trained eyes are as valuable as their hands; it was a TreeKeeper who discovered the area's first emerald ash borer infestation.

Their work has limits. "No climbing; no chain saws," DeHorn put it. "We do urban forestry lite."

But there is nothing "lite" about the need. While forest trees can live for more than 100 years, urban trees beset by pollution and limited space usually die in 15 years unless they get special care, according to Openlands, the urban conservation organization that runs the program.

The class, whose fall session begins Saturday, is a serious one. The syllabus includes tree physiology,



invasive species, common tree diseases and insect damage and tree morphology. In a nod to the realities of urban forestry, there is also instruction on how to work with the government agencies that oversee the city's 4 million trees and with community organizations.

Classes are taught by foresters from the city's Bureau of Forestry and the Chicago Park District, along with professional arborists and staffers from the Chicago Department of Environment and the Morton Arboretum. Some institutions grant college credit for the course. Trainees must attend all seven classes, pass written and field exams and pledge to perform at least 24 hours of volunteer work in the following year.

"It's a real commitment, but you learn a whole range of things," said Davis, a board member of Openlands who took the first TreeKeepers training given.

Holy recalls a class called "How to Kill a Tree" about mistakes people make with trees, like planting them in holes too small or leaving plastic protectors on indefinitely.

"I see professional landscapers who don't know how to mulch a tree," Holy said. (The proper way is to arrange the mulch like a doughnut so the mulch does not touch the bark. Mulch piled against the tree bark will make it decompose along with the mulch).

Nearly 1,100 people have gone through TreeKeepers training since Openlands began the program in 1991. There are TreeKeepers working in city parks, area forest preserves and park district natural areas like the Burnham Nature Sanctuary.

At Burnham, the site's TreeKeeper stewards have plans.

"This year we're going to plant a bunch of trees," Davis said. "And not crappy trees like locusts, mulberries and poplars. They're not native trees."

He and Holy know which ones are.

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IF YOU WANT TO BE A TREEKEEPER

The fall session begins Saturday and will be given at Rowan Park, 11546 S. Avenue L on the city's Southeast Side. The \$80 fee covers the cost of class materials. For more information, call TreeKeepers Organizer Jim DeHorn at 312-863-6259.

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