



CHARLOTTE KIDD

The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's Tree Tenders

by Charlotte Kidd

Like the saplings they plant, The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's Philadelphia Green Tree Tenders learn to make the most of less-than-perfect conditions. Philadelphia's Tree Tenders prefer rain-fall *after* they've planted. But when the nursery truck arrives loaded with balled-and-burlapped trees, volunteers are ready, willing, and able to plant despite foul weather.

Last April in West Philadelphia's Clark Park, 16 volunteers braved a cool morning drizzle to plant 11 hefty London planetrees and one serviceberry around the large park. Dressed in rain gear, hats, and gloves, some unloaded the 300-pound trees from the delivery truck. Others measured and dug planting holes between the sidewalk and street.

Guided by Philadelphia Green's project coordinator Mindy Maslin, they eased massive root balls into tree pits, backfilled, then mulched. That day the rain watered in the transplants.

"We're very pleased," said Clark Park Tree Tender Paul Brook. "The people who turned out were the real good workers. We got all the trees in by 3 o'clock and they're looking pretty good!"

Organizing and planting trees in Philadelphia is just one aspect of Tree Tenders. Fresh from a three-session training, Clark Park Tree Tenders wrote the grant to pay for trees. They also coordinated other fundraising and hands-on work with the local community group. Funded through a grant

Above: Clark Park Tree Tenders remove twine and pull away burlap from one of 12 trees planted under April showers.



IRA BECKOFF

Photos: From upper left to lower right

At the Elwood Park Arbor Day celebration, youngsters water the new transplant they'll tend year 'round.

A teacher taking Tree Tender Training examines a weed.

At this spring's Picnic With a Purpose, Tree Tenders shoveled mulch around a newly planted sapling.

At the nursery, middle school students select a tree for their Adopt-a-School tree lab.

from The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) and Pennsylvania Urban Resources Partnership (PURP) and the community's shade tree and general funds, this project was the first of several plantings they did last spring.

Tree Tenders Take Root

PHS' Philadelphia Green (PG) Tree Tenders' program emerged in answer to a challenge: urban trees dying young in a city with increas-

ing air pollution. "The Tree Tenders' program started because our urban forest was dying at an alarming rate," explained Mindy Maslin.

"For every tree planted, seven die. A city tree's life expectancy is under 10 years."

In Philadelphia, an estimated 1.45 million people live in 109 different neighborhoods, according to John Hamilton of the Committee of Seventy. After six years of training volunteers in tree care, PHS counts 900 of them as Tree Tenders in 86 of the city's neighborhoods.

These volunteers have raised more than \$250,000 for tree care, planting, and maintenance. They work with students and community groups; they lobby city officials; they meet for working picnics. And early Saturday mornings, it's not unusual to see an array of Tree Tenders cultivating tree pits and pruning low-hanging branches along streets and in parks throughout the city.

In many Pennsylvania communities, shade tree commissions handle tree-related issues. In Philadelphia, the Fairmount Park Commission (FPC) is responsible for the city's 61 parks on 8,800 acres and its 250,000 street trees. In the early 1900s, city budget cuts reduced FPC staff and curtailed tree maintenance, planting, and dead tree removal.

Other East Coast cities had faced and responded to urban deforestation. New York developed the Citizen Pruner program; Maryland

the Baltimore-based Tremendous Maryland program.

Philadelphia was ready for its own form of tree stewardship: community-based, self-sufficient groups of trained volunteers working independently as well as in tandem when the need arises. A successful tree steward program and a healthy urban forest have a lot in common. Both thrive on diversity, benefit from thoughtful planning, involve appropriate siting, and derive strength and longevity through adaptability.

"With Philadelphia's history of volunteerism, I thought a Tree Tenders' program could really fit," Mindy said. Through PHS' outreach arm called Philadelphia Green, the Tree Tender pro-

gram was a year in the making — from planning to funding to training. The William Penn Foundation, which supports tree education citywide and tree planting in lower-income neighborhoods, provided start-up money and continues as Tree Tenders' primary funder.

To encourage community residents

to work together, Tree Tender training is offered free to groups of four or more. Individuals can participate for a fee or join an existing group. "The response from the get-go was incredible, with 60 people in the first class in June 1993," said Mindy. "Now six years and 10 classes later, even more people continue to be interested. Some groups come to a training with one or two people, then return with as many as 17."

Volunteers may be motivated by altruism, community beautification, and interest in the environment. No matter their raison d'etre, they always appreciate being appreciated. "At Philadelphia Green, we're



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very perk-oriented,” Mindy said. “For Tree Tenders, we provide 100 percent cotton T-shirts with the Tree Tenders’ logo, bumper stickers, pizza, \$100 worth of tree-care tools for graduating groups of four or more (loppers, hand pruners, saw, shovel), the Street Tree Factsheets book, and the Pennsylvania State University soil testing kit.”

Tree Tenders know no bounds. Their socioeconomic backgrounds range from Ph.Ds to people who haven’t graduated from high school; their ethnicities span the rainbow — from Asian-Americans and African Americans to Society Hill blue-bloods.

West Philadelphia, with its international cultures, university influence, and economic variables, reflects diversity. Reaching across social and neighborhood boundaries, Tree Tender groups there frequently combine people, skill, and resources to share community beautification work. Although helping in Clark Park last April, Spruce Hill Tree Tender Amanda Benner is a veteran from the first Tree Tender training. In 1995, she was among the Spruce Hill Tree Tenders who literally broke new ground. They spent a Saturday guiding a hydraulic cement-cutting saw through concrete sidewalks to expand tree pits. Meanwhile, Baltimore Avenue Tree Tenders cleared away pit debris, then mixed compost and mulch around the exposed tree roots.

“It’s a bit messy and real hard work,” Amanda had said at the time. “The cement cutter only does so much. You still need manual labor to break and removed the con-



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crete pieces and debris, then load the concrete into a truck for disposal.” Six sweaty hours later they’d enlarged five pits. For this project, Spruce Hill had written a winning grant for \$2,300 from Pennsylvania Urban and Community Forestry Council’s America The Beautiful initiative. **Tree Tender Training.** Tree Tenders don’t just grab a saw and cut. They begin with education. Each volunteer participates in the 12-hour train-

ing by experts about the basics: tree physiology, tree identification, urban stresses, basic pruning, pit care, grant writing, volunteer organizing, fund-raising, and working with the media.

“The training is based on what we want the volunteers to do,” Mindy explained. “We saw the greatest need to be basic maintenance. We added conducting a tree inventory, recognizing when a mature tree needed an arborist’s attention, and handling situations like a raised sidewalk.”

PG’s approach is to decentralize, giving groups the skills to be self-sufficient and independent. “A decentralized program works well by enabling the volunteer groups to have ownership, to be responsible for their own projects,” Mindy explained. “Volunteers learn to plan and run programs on their own — from holding neighborhood tree care days to fund-raising, from doing tree inventories to organizing Arbor Day programs and school events.

“Eighty-six communities holding their own workdays and writing their own grants and building their own organizations are able to accomplish amazing feats,” Mindy said. They raise funds through grass-roots activities such as music recitals and community fairs. They solicit donations, services, and money from small business associations. They seek grants from PURP, the Pennsylvania Environmental Council, and the Pennsylvania Urban and Community Forestry Council’s America the Beautiful initiative. They also provide the wide range of in-kind services and money that most grants require as a match.

Tree Tenders Branch Out

“Training just whet Tree Tenders’ appetites for information,” Mindy recalled. “From the beginning, they said that after the first night of training, they could never look at trees the same way. From that point on, they couldn’t walk down the street comfortably without wanting to prune suckers or cultivate a tree pit.”

They’d absorbed the basics such as pruning with their two feet on the ground and aerating, weeding, mulching tree pits. “Tree Tenders



Above: A student prunes at his school’s tree lab.

Left: Spruce Hill Tree Tender Amanda Benner guides cement-cutting saw through city sidewalk to expand tree pit. Tree Tenders Lauren Leatherborrow and Joe Shapiro watch to keep the blade on the chalk lines.

became more sophisticated,” Mindy said. “They wanted and needed more information.”

Newsletter. To help keep volunteers up-to-date and in touch with each others’ progress, PHS created a quarterly newsletter, the Philadelphia Treebune. Tree Tenders contribute articles about their projects. Tree care experts explore issues such as choosing the right tree species for urban conditions. There’s always an announcement of activities to come: for example, the Annual Bike Ride of Philadelphia’s Unique Trees, and the Tree Tenders’ Picnic With a Purpose.

Continuing Education. As Tree Tenders gained experience, PG responded by offering continuing education programs. The topics vary: caring for mature trees, putting a street tree to bed for the winter, advanced pruning, tree identification, insects and diseases, grant writing, doing a street tree inventory.

“It became obvious that the majority of Tree Tenders wanted to get out there and plant, so we added training about tree planting,” Mindy said.

“That’s also where most of the funding was.” In communities with stands of mature trees, volunteers felt connected to their majestic presence. They asked for mature tree maintenance resources. PHS responded in two ways. Besides persuading funders to see the importance of maintenance, PHS secured a PURP grant for maintenance programs such as large-scale pruning and hazardous branch removal. Many Tree Tenders used that funding to good advantage. PURP now requires that recipients of any grants related to trees attend Tree Tenders’ training.

Picnic With a Purpose. At the seasonal Picnic With A Purpose, Tree Tenders throughout the city get together informally, talk about each others’ projects and hone tree care skills. Besides sharing delicious potluck fare, new and veteran Tree Tenders attendees practice

tree pruning and planting skills at the picnic site. They’ve pruned saplings in a community tree nursery, potted up container trees for distribution, learned the nitty-gritty of starting a tree farm, and more.

Partnering. “Partnering is one key to the Tree Tenders’ success,” Mindy said. “The Fairmount Park Commission is our key partner. We included the FPC in the planning and invite their arborists’ to help with the training — from pruning to making presentations about FPC guidelines and standards for street tree planting and maintenance.”

Julianne Schieffer, forester with the Pennsylvania State University’s Urban and Community Forestry Council, Urban Forestry Extension, and Hal Rosner, arborist from Barlett Tree Experts, Co., continue to be main partners in designing and presenting the trainings.

Temple University’s Department of Landscape Architecture and Horticulture at Ambler also has been a really wonderful partner, Mindy said. The native plant nursery staff and course professors speak to Tree Tender trainees, open the nursery for field trips, offer native trees at cost to Tree Tender groups, and donate stock for school tree labs.

Tree Tenders Flower

Arbor Day Programs in Schools. “We saw that kids could be real resources to trees and Tree Tenders or they could be real negative influences,” Mindy said. “So we encouraged Tree Tenders to reach out to the youth in their communities. Running classes about how to organize Arbor Day programs was our first way of giving youngsters the tools to positively impact their environment.” The programs are as varied as the neighborhoods — from classroom projects to large activities in a neighboring park or around the school grounds.

Adopt-a-School Programs. Building on the success of Arbor Day programs, PG created a Tree Tenders’ Adopt-a-School program to train teachers and Tree Tenders to work together. They collaborate to bring environmental education to students through interdisciplinary classroom and field activities. They celebrate their accomplishments on Arbor Day or Earth Day. Now with 20 such school-Tree Tender partnerships, PG has designated one staff member to coordinate that component.

Thanks to the enthusiastic Tree Tender Tom Lederer of the Kensington South Neighborhood Advisory Council, many youngsters are being

Tips for municipalities starting tree care training

- Cultivate partnerships not only with supportive people but those who can provide good volunteer education.
- Develop a decentralized program that enables volunteer groups to have ownership and to accomplish their identified projects.
- Train and support groups to function self-sufficiently.
- Attract media attention to highlight tree care accomplishments as well as a way to recruit new people and reward veteran volunteers.
- Build relationships with local politicians so they recognize tree lovers as a vocal and substantive constituency.

charmed by trees. One of the first trainees to involve elementary students, Tom still works with teachers to do environmental activities ranging from tree identification to astronomy both in and outside the classroom. That informal partnership was a model for PG's formal Adopt-A-School Program to follow.

Filing out of the John Moffet School in South Kensington, earth science students encircled several balled-and-burlapped trees awaiting planting. Some heaved shovels full of soil into the fresh tree pits. Through Tom's work with the school's earth science coordinator on an America the Beautiful grant, Moffet received 11 native trees for students to tend.

Moffet students also enjoy PG-supported class trips. On one trip to Temple University's Ambler campus, students chose native trees to bring back and plant in raised beds called tree labs. For a tree lab, PG builds a raised bed in which students can grow trees in containers. After choosing saplings at a nursery, students transplant them into large pots to grow for two years before a subsequent planting in the school yard, near the school, or in the community. During the summer, Tree Tenders, neighbors, and students care for the trees, which become tree stock for their communities.

Today Tom, the students, nearby neighbors, and 14 South Kensington Tree Tenders have their hands full. Their community green spaces are buzzing with life. During the last six years, their grant-writing and fundraising have garnered about \$100,000. They've planted and now tend a wildlife habitat, several school and playground plots, a butterfly garden, a Shakespearean garden, and a children's garden.

"I went to Tree Tenders for selfish reasons, thinking that we were going to get a few trees," Tom said. "I never thought about how much we could learn and how viable Philadelphia Green could make us to do it on our own. They give you enough advice and such so you can go out on your own. Philly Green is there to help you, just like our parents would do. We'll just be eternally grateful."

Tree Tenders Propagate

In Tree Tenders' most recent evolution, PHS's

Mindy Maslin and Penn State's Julianne Schieffer developed a training program for municipalities about how to start tree stewardship training.

"Tree Tenders is a wonderful way to provide connections between trees and people as well as tree people to other tree people," Julianne said. "Since the training works so well on a community level, it is a program that can easily empower people in other municipalities outside Philadelphia."

The program for municipalities includes four major slide shows for Tree Tender training that will be available statewide through the Pennsylvania State University's extension service. There is a worksheet to guide people through the steps to plan training. Filling out the worksheet helps to define training goals as well as to identify topics to meet that goal, presentation speakers, training location, number of participants, training costs, and perks for volunteers.

Mindy and Julianne also make presentations to groups such as the Southeastern Pennsylvania Shade Tree Association and the American Community Gardening Association.

Tree Tenders Back Home

In her Philadelphia apartment, Wissahickon Tree Tender Laura Moorhead takes a breather since writing the grant, then organizing a nine-tree planting including a contractor's donation of sidewalk cutting. "It's important to pace yourself and to share the group leadership," Laura advises.

Wissahickon Tree Tenders have had a busy first year, working on several small and large-scale projects simultaneously. Most daunting is their plan to transform an overgrown park/dumping area into a woodland with a butterfly meadow, native plants, paths, and benches.

Keeping people focused and motivated through their aching muscles and hectic schedules is the challenge, Laura said. Her advice: "Everybody wants to be involved with success. Always tell people about the successes, no matter how small, or how tired you are. Everybody likes success."

Volunteers

- Provide volunteers with a scope and depth of knowledge so they appreciate trees and feel comfortable and capable of making a contribution.
- Offer ongoing educational programs responsive to the volunteers' requests.
- Build in positive reinforcement for volunteers.
- Provide perks so volunteers feel appreciated.
- Focus public recognition on the volunteers; their accomplishments also will reflect well on their parent organization.
- Provide a wide range of volunteer opportunities to meet their varied interests and backgrounds.



Tree Tenders in training enjoy the best pizza in town, one of the perks of the program.