

A Good Time for Trees

By Maxwell Wiater, City of Portsmouth Arborist Foreman

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Traveling around Portsmouth by foot, bicycle or vehicle, it's impossible to miss the gorgeous fall colors of this, our Tree City USA. The Parks and Public Greenery Division is particularly pleased to see the trees we've been planting each spring showing nice, healthy color along the roadsides.

"Leaf peepers" make the fall season the second most popular season for visitors to Portsmouth and to the state. Yet as we enjoy the display in, literally our own backyards, those of us who love our trees know that this beauty is fleeting. Not only will the leaves fall (sooner or later, depending on the whims of sudden storms), the trees with the most dramatic colors may also become a thing of memory, like dependable snow for the holidays or ice for outdoor skating.

Throughout Northern New England the native hardwood forests of maple, birch and oak are threatened by the warming climate. Some estimates suggest that to see fall foliage when they grow up our grandchildren may have to travel to Canada because our local trees can no longer bear the stress of extreme heat and insect invaders who should die off in hard frosts to give the trees a break. We're already seeing the threat from Emerald Ash Borers that are decimating our urban forest. Some fear our beeches may be next, under attack by another invasive insect and a parasitic fungus.

The Arbor Day Foundation has named Portsmouth a Tree City USA every year for more than two decades – that's a generation in Portsmouth who have grown up enjoying the color, shade and oxygen the 10,000 trees in our urban forest give to residents – for free. Those benefits reflect the annual lifecycles of our trees as they activate chlorophyll from sunshine in the summer to build their canopies and then reveal the natural red, yellow and bronze colors in the leaves as that photosynthesis process slows in the fall. All the while our trees are breathing in the carbon dioxide we produce (among the 30 billion tons released to the atmosphere each year) and exhaling oxygen. Trees are the oxygen machines that give us life support across the planet. Until they aren't.

Thanks to the City's Trees and Public Greenery Committee created in 2003, the City is recognized as an advocate for trees. The Arbor Day Foundation, the U.S. Forest Service and the National Association of State Foresters have presented the Tree City USA Award for meeting the program's four requirements: maintaining the Parks & Greenery Division and the Trees & Public Greenery Committee, upholding a tree-care ordinance, committing a budget of at least \$2 per capita for the urban forest and presenting an annual Arbor Day observance and proclamation. On top of that, for the past several years, they have honored us with the Tree City USA Growth Award for demonstrating environmental improvement and a higher level of tree care, including the fact that the City plants at least two hundred new trees each year – replacing trees that fail

with new ones (often varieties better suited to the stress of their urban locations). The volunteer members of the Trees & Public Greenery Committee and the residents who plant and care for trees and advocate for tree conservation are an army standing at the crossroads, defending our urban forest from a variety of threats.

In 2026, when the nation celebrates its 250th birthday, Langdon Park, the City's first public park, will celebrate its 150th. Dedicated in 1876, Langdon Park was filled as an arboretum with a wide variety of trees donated by residents and businesses. During Portsmouth's 400th in 2023, a similarly wide variety – 400 trees! -- were shared with residents and planted among our parks and sidewalks.

All of them are reminders that, as the proverb (often quoted by the Arbor Day Foundation) says, "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now."

Now *is* a good time for planting trees, to give their roots time to settle in for the winter and build their resources under the snow, waiting for spring. Next April the City Parks and Greenery Division will be out planting trees again and offering free trees for residents to plant. And like our reputation as a Tree City USA, our trees will continue to grow, reaching for the sky.