

OUR LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH TREES

Deforestation of private properties contradicts greenest city objective

Homeowners take trees down because of cultural preferences, or because they want more light for their tomatoes, or because trees create work.

In December 2006, when a windstorm slammed into Vancouver on Hanukkah Eve, the public's attention focused on the blowdown that felled hundreds of trees in Stanley Park.



Note: Eventually all trees fall down. Many quite unexpectedly. Many will fall on our homes. Some people will die as a result of being forced to retain a tree they themselves planted voluntarily years ago. Trees size should stay at a human scale, or at least not bigger than the homes. The future lies in solar power which tall trees will impede. Draconian bylaws are not the answer. - cjk

A 2006 windstorm felled hundreds of cedars and firs in Stanley Park, but the real damage occurred later when homeowners began felling perfectly healthy trees because they saw them as threats. Wayne Leidenfrost

A much greater destruction would happen later outside the park.

Not only did scores of trees on private properties fall during the storm, but a greater number of perfectly healthy trees would come down in its wake. Throughout Metro Vancouver, homeowners, spooked by the images of the park's splintered piles of big cedars and firs, looked at the trees on their properties as potential threats.

After the storm, two tree-removal companies I talked with were both booked for the foreseeable future, hired to take down healthy trees. One of the firms figured it would keep them busy for two years.

Homeowners felt the need to pre-empt calamity. (I've felt that impulse myself. I took down a 25-metre-tall fir standing a metre from the side of our house because it towered over my sons' bedroom. A neighbour, upset that it was coming down, took incriminating photos.)

Trees are felled on private property for a variety of reasons; some valid, some less so.

Homeowners take trees down because of cultural preferences, or because they want more light for their tomatoes, or because trees create work.

Trees litter. Trees clog eavestroughs.

And trees, the bane of developers, come down when an old home does, or when properties are given over to condos. Densification often means deforestation.

In Vancouver, the loss of trees has been in direct contradiction to the city's goal of being the greenest city in the world by 2020.

Vancouver's tree canopy has shrunk, not grown.

"What we have numbers for are from 1995 to 2013," said park board biologist Nick Page, "and we know there's been a decline of the canopy in that time period. And we found that most of the decline is on private land.

"The number of trees in parks and on city-owned land, including street trees, has been stable or has slightly increased, whereas the private land component is where we're seeing the greatest loss. It's a citywide phenomenon in that sense."

In 1995, the tree canopy covered 22.5 per cent of Vancouver. By 2013, it had fallen to 18 per cent. This was five per cent less than in Seattle, with its greater population and more industry.

Tree cover has a class component. West Point Grey, for example, has the largest amount of area under trees, at almost 29 per cent; Strathcona has the least, at less than six per cent.

As Page said, most of the decline came on private land. Just over 60 per cent of the canopy is private land, and in the last two decades, 96 per cent of the decline has taken place there.

Some 23,500 healthy mature trees on private property have been felled, with almost half those trees coming down simply for no other reason than the homeowner wanted them down. Under a then-existing bylaw, homeowners could take down one tree per year, regardless of its health or size. Many Vancouverites took advantage of that allowance and the city estimated that, under the bylaw, five trees were being removed each day.

City council repealed that allowance in 2014 and increased inspections and fines. It helped slow the harvest. In a December 2015 report to council, the planning department reported that under the new restrictions, 700 tree-removal requests had been denied and more than 2,500 trees had been saved due to increased inspections and the repeal of the allowance.

What's left of the canopy still typifies Vancouver's verdant nature. And the trees provide an environmental effect for which there is no replacement, absorbing 34 tonnes of particulate matter and 20,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide annually.

Trees offer shade in our increasingly hot summers, retain groundwater, house wildlife and even, according to the city's Urban Forest Strategy paper, soothe the savage breast: It reported that blood pressure and muscle tension are reduced after three minutes of looking at trees.

At present, the city has embarked on a campaign to plant 150,000 trees by 2020.

Page said they were about onethird of the way there, though it's going to take a long time to undo the damage.

If the plan works as is hoped, Vancouver's tree canopy won't reach 1995 levels until sometime after 2050.