

Moving Together: Getting Around A-Town



Working Hard for You – Street Trees in Arlington

by Rachael Stark

I'm walking down a quiet Arlington side street, enjoying a soft drizzle. Cozy houses, lively squirrels, fragrant flowers and stately trees. As I stroll, I am embraced by trees. Trees keep rain off my head, but their worth is far more than that. Trees hold carbon, give off oxygen, shade houses, clean air, and hold fast the very earth beneath our feet. Our tree lined streets are a beauty and a joy, but also economically valuable.

Arlington is a wonderfully walkable place. We have places people want to walk. We have miles of sidewalks leading from homes to workplaces, shops, libraries, schools, parks, paths and historic landmarks. We have infrastructure that supports walking - sidewalks, crosswalks, walk lights. Arlington is graced with beauty and variety that makes walking pleasant – friendly neighbors to greet, five centuries worth of houses, stores and public buildings to see, and street trees to shade and protect us.

Arlington has an impressive urban forest. We have yards and parks full of trees, and miles of tree-lined streets. Our street trees work hard for us. As a municipal employee, it would be hard to do better than a street tree. Our teachers, fire fighters, police officers, librarians and Town Hall staff work hard for years, but a street tree can work hard for centuries. Every hour of every day trees clean air with their leaves, hold land in place with their roots, cool us by shading sun, and shelter us from cold wind. Trees save us money in heating, cooling, cleaning and flood control, and make us money by increasing property values.

A tree-lined street is an economic and environmental powerhouse, and a delight to the senses. Useful and beautiful are pink apple blossoms in spring, honey scented linden flowers in summer, fiery maple leaves in fall, and the winter green of pine. Taking only a few square feet of space on the ground, trees offer an arch of beauty above our heads.

When Europeans came to America, they were astonished by the forests. England had been overharvesting its forests for centuries by the time the Pilgrims sailed. The cold, drafty houses of Jane Austin and Jane Eyre were that way, at least in part, because firewood to heat homes had become scarce. The New England forests looked like riches to the English immigrants, but also looked dark and scary. The woods of New England echoed primordial forests, full of wolves and spooks.

Colonials tended to distrust trees as dark, scary wilderness. Cutting trees meant beating back wilderness for civilization. Victorians lived in a more tamed landscape. Planting and tending trees symbolized gentle, nurturing nature. In the years after World War II, progress was king. Builders leveled lots, then installed air conditioning and sprinklers as house, garden and yard baked in the sun.

We haven't seen wolves in Arlington in years, and most Arlingtonians are not very spooky. But fear of trees seems to have returned. From the Victorian era to about 1960, houses were built between existing trees. Trees were routinely planted along public streets. Then the Second Great Deforestation began. Now before a house is built, down come the trees. Most people want trees on their property, and on the streets nearby. People will pay more for a home with mature trees standing. But developers seem to have forgotten how to build around trees.

Modern home building and Town and State projects all seem to call for a clearcut before the work begins. Sometimes before a project is even fully planned, out come the chainsaws and the chippers. Buzz, whirr, clank – over they go. Trees that have proven themselves successful in growing, cooling, shading and stopping floods are felled. Decades of wealth, gone in an hour. Skinny saplings planted to replace mature trees face a struggle to survive. Most street trees die in the first few years from disease, too much salt, or too little water or space. Few trees planted today will remain in 50 years.

Cutting mature trees and planting saplings unlikely to survive is a poor bet. It makes economic and ecological sense to keep the trees we already have. Trees keep our sidewalks and neighborhoods beautiful and desirable places. Before we cut a street tree or a tree in our yard, we should think very hard. Can we build around it instead, and preserve a safe place to store carbon that also happens to clean the air, prevent flooding, offer beauty, and shade house and walker? Trees work hard for you. Please protect them.

To learn more about Arlington's trees and the Arlington Tree Committee, visit www.arlingontrees.org.

Rachael Stark is the Founder of Walking in Arlington.