

No Place for Old Trees—Part V

By Cass Turnbull

Common Misconceptions

While investigating how to change the way decision makers think about trees and the Urban Forest, I was advised to pay attention to what stops people who like trees from voting in favor of them. Here in Seattle I came up with the following list of misperceptions that keep us stuck in nowheres-ville.

1) **Trees are nice, but not necessary.**

Not True: A decade of research has determined that urban trees are utilitarian and save money.

2) **Seattle has lots and lots of trees, so it isn't a problem.**

Not True: Seattle's tree cover is about average compared to other dense cities in America. See "No Place for Old Trees, Part 1," in the Fall 2015 PlantAmnesty Newsletter.

3) **Seattle is a clean green town.** We're not polluted and not polluting, so we don't need a lot more trees.

Not True: Seattle has big problems with stormwater pollution going into the surrounding bays and with air pollution, especially in poorer parts of town, both of which are mitigated by tree cover. See the PlantAmnesty/TreePAC PowerPoint presentation, "No Place for Old Trees," on YouTube: PlantAmnesty channel.

4) **If we run low on trees, we can always plant more;** in fact, we are already planting two trees for every one cut down.

Not True: We can only sustain as much tree cover as we have permeable land to support it. Seattle already has 62% impermeable land, and we are losing permeable land fast. See "No Place for Old Trees, Part 1," in the Fall 2015 PlantAmnesty Newsletter and the PlantAmnesty/TreePAC PowerPoint presentation, "No Place for Old Trees," on YouTube: PlantAmnesty channel.

5) **The new, alternative forms of green infrastructure (GI) can do the work of trees and open spaces more efficiently.** (GI includes green roofs, bioswales, rain gardens, pervious pavement, green walls and facades, and cisterns).

Maybe: The long-term viability of these alternatives has not been shown in America. More importantly, the GI alternative does not take into account the multiple benefits of trees and open space. See "No Place for Old Trees" in the past three PlantAmnesty Newsletters: "Part 2" in the Winter 2016 issue, "Part 2b" in the Spring 2016 issue, and "Part 3" in the Summer 2016 issue.

6) **To fund urban forests we'd have to raise taxes** or cut the budgets of many departments that need all that they have been allotted.

Not True: The Urban Forest SAVES the city money. It does not COST the city money. See "No Place for Old Trees Part 3" in the summer 2016 issue of the PlantAmnesty newsletter.

7) **For every tree we sacrifice in the city, we are saving three in the country.** The Smart Growth assertion is that we do vastly more environmental good by stopping sprawl, which is accomplished by densifying the cities. Among other negatives sprawl causes global climate change because people commute to the city for work.

Faulty Dichotomy and Incomplete Reckoning: Removing the Urban Forest and green space to build more housing is unnecessary because both density and greenspace goals can be achieved by building 'up not out' *inside* the city. Removing open space is potentially counterproductive because people move to the suburbs to live near green. Lack of green space impacts the city's grey infrastructure, public health, livability, and local environment. These factors need to be included in density decisions as part of 'cost benefit' analysis and 'unintended consequences'. See 'No Place' issues.

8) With regard to passing tree preservation laws, **you can't tell people what to do on their own property** (and developers will sue the city!).

Not True: See expansion directly below.

Private Property Trumps— A Concept that Must Be Challenged

When Seattle City Council members are asked to pass a Tree Preservation Ordinance, and even when neighbors are complaining that the guy across the street cut down his landmark beech tree, you can count on somebody saying something like, "We can't tell people what they can do on their own property."

But we do tell people what they can and can't do on their own property *all the time*. You can't run a jackhammer all night long, you can't start a pig farm in Laurelhurst, you can't pollute the little stream that runs through your property, you can't wire your house any way you want. In fact, you can't even have more than three cats, park your RV on the street, or have an unfenced pond or pool in your yard.

Having a tree is seen as being a private decision providing a personal, aesthetic value to a homeowner. Challenging a homeowner's choice to cut it down seems to be wildly overbearing and intrusive, like the city telling someone what color they can paint their house (which, by the way, is what covenant communities do *all the time*).

Here are two examples of other seemingly intrusive laws that resulted in vigorous voter objections—1) the law that requires that you put your banana peel in a separate container than your regular garbage can and—2) the plastic bag ban (more specifically, the ban on getting free plastic bags at your supermarket).

How did those laws get passed? Well, someone convinced the city's decision makers that there would be an important benefit to the larger community—to the city budget, to the environment, and to their neighbor's pocket books.

The Banana Peel

The effect of tossing your banana peel doesn't amount to much, but the cumulative effect of everybody doing it, does. Multiply your peel by the number of peels you toss out a year, times the number of other people in Seattle who do the same, plus all the other food waste people want to throw in the garbage, and you've got 20%-30% of your landfill being made up of food waste (that's the national average). That wastes land (and the gas to get to the landfill). It releases methane (a greenhouse gas). The point is that what you do with your banana peel affects your neighbors' utility bills, the cost to the city to use the landfill, and the global environment, all of which impact the larger community.

The Plastic Bag

The same applies to the free plastic bag that you used to get at the grocery store. The individual impact of using a single plastic bag seems small, but some very smart people managed to demonstrate to our city's decision makers the cumulative effect that tossing all those bags has on the wider community. The bag ban became the law of the land—by land, I mean Seattle. Like the banana peel, when plastic bags go to the landfill, natural resources are wasted. A fabulous visual aid exists on the web that shows what 60,000 plastic bags (the number used by Americans every 5 minutes) looks like set out on the ground. Using the zoom function you can move in closer and closer until you can

distinguish the individual bags themselves. It's impactful. (If you are reading this on your device, go to www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/rtn/#plastic-bags to see the photo by photographer Chris Jordan depicting the 60,000 plastic bags.)

Even so, this picture does not have the same impact as the first time you see a turtle with caught in the handle of a plastic bag, making you realize how your small actions affect the larger world.



Thus far, the Urban Forestry community's outreach to the public and to decision makers has focused on showing that trees have utilitarian and environmental values—they are not just a pretty face. What is missing is making the connection between your private tree and the public good. We need to see how the cumulative effect of tree removals spells serious trouble for everybody—you, your neighbors, the city, the environment, and the global community. Trees are a privately owned public utility. I have the video clip needed to demonstrate this written in my head, *Utili-Tree*—it just needs funding! s