

OUT ON A LIMB

‘Tree ordinances’

By: Roger Davis, Landscape Architect
Davis Design Group, Augusta, Georgia

What is the purpose of a municipal tree ordinance? Most people would answer ‘beautification’ and that is partially true. But the main purpose of a ‘Tree Ordinance’ is for the mitigation of the heat island effect caused by construction of impervious structures such as buildings and pavements. They aid in air purification and oxygen regeneration, absorb excess ozone and carbon dioxide linked to climate change, retardation of storm water runoff helping to prevent erosion, noise reduction, glare and screening of objectionable views. Trees enhance property values and also help to conserve energy. Did you know that even leafless deciduous trees can block as much as 60 per cent of the sun’s energy? The strategy for handling the sun is simple: Block it when it’s hot: let it in when it’s cold and you do this by using deciduous trees.

Most ordinances require trees to be planted in required parking lot islands to mitigate a sea of asphalt with no green space. In July or August, when I drive into a parking lot, I try to find a space beside a tree.

According to an article by the National Gardening Association, “Heating costs can be trimmed by as much as 30 per cent, air-conditioning costs cut by 50 to 75 per cent and water bills pruned by 40 per cent.” Trees do make a difference.

There is a tree in Athens, Georgia that was so prized by its owner that in 1890 it was so deeded along with eight feet of property around, to belong to itself. There is a monument on site where the text of the land deed is inscribed thereon. ‘For and in consideration of the great love I bear this tree and the great desire I have for its protection for all time, I convey entire possession of itself and all land within eight feet of the tree on all sides – William H. Jackson.’ The white oak tree, thought to be about 400 years old, was blown over in 1946 and members of a local garden club planted an acorn from the original tree and have kept watch over it ever since.

I hate to say it but some businesses would not plant a single tree if not required by the public agency. Rather than seeing the aesthetic benefit of trees they only see additional costs and maintenance.

Tree ordinances also provide standards for the protection of public trees. Many people think the tree that is in the right of way at the front of their house is their tree, to do with as they wish. ‘I planted it so it’s mine.’ It is expected that you will preserve and maintain trees in the right of way but the trees actually belongs to the municipality on whose property it is planted.. It is a public tree. The intent of a Tree Ordinance is to eventually establish tree lined streets forming a canopy in which to drive through.

Most tree ordinances require a 10 or 15’ street yard where trees are required at 40 to 60’ on center. The street yard is adjacent to the right of way on private property. The reason for the street yard is to insure that the trees will be protected when roads are widened to the extent of the existing right of way. These trees are also protected by the tree ordinance.

An article in the ‘Chicago Gardener’ stated that research has shown that when business districts are lined with trees, consumers give them amenity and comfort ratings 80 per cent greater than treeless ones and judge the quality of products they shopped for as 30 per cent higher. Why? Trees are an indication of caring.

Most tree ordinances require buffers of berms, fencing and plantings to screen a residential property from a professional, commercial or industrial use. This buffer is to act as both a visual and sound barrier between the different zoned uses.

We’ve all seen the positive effect of the requirements of tree ordinances over the years since tree ordinances have been enacted.

But do you really need an article or an ordinance to cherish trees? I don’t.

Roger Davis, Davis Design Group, 120 Fifth Street, Augusta, GA 30901, (706) 724-4666, roger@davisdesign.org