



Winter, 2013; Vol. 3, No.3

A Comparison of Leaf Removal Programs in Six Communities

By Whitey Lueck

For thousands of years here in the middle-latitudes, deciduous broad-leafed trees have dropped their leaves every fall, just like clockwork. The natural leaf mulch that developed beneath the trees maintained a rich habitat for a host of critters, from invertebrates to birds and small mammals. Over time, the leaves decomposed and returned their nutrients to the soil, to be used again by the tree that produced them, in a cycle that was both simple and elegant.

Eventually, towns and cities arose in which people planted trees, first for food, and more recently for both shade and ornament. Meanwhile, mowed lawns became fashionable, and leaves that fell on the lawns needed to be removed so they didn't smother the grass. Leaves also needed to be removed from the roofs of buildings, as well as from paved areas such as sidewalks and streets. Generally, leaves that

that fall from trees growing on their own properties and in the adjacent publicly-owned park strip (if any) by having them hauled off-site—despite strong encouragement from municipalities to compost the leaves on-site or use them as mulch.

Since the 1960s, Eugene has had a fall leaf collection program that removes leaves that have been placed in the street for pick-up—leaves that have fallen both on the adjacent *private* property as well as those that have fallen in the *public* right-of-way (park strip plus street). And Eugene rightly boasts that all of the leaves that are picked up are “recycled” in one of three ways: 1) by being delivered to residents who request the leaves and use them as mulch/compost material; 2) by being taken to community gardens; and 3) by being composted by commercial recyclers or used on City parkland.

Eugeneans are asked to place leaves to be picked up in the street *no sooner than the week before pick-up*, so they don't block the street, bike lanes, or curbside parking areas, and so they don't create storm water problems due to blocked gutters and storm drains. And the City maintains an excellent website showing the real-time status of the leaf removal program, including where crews are currently working and where they'll be headed next.

But the fact is that most Eugeneans ignore the rules and place their leaves in the street long before pick-up begins. They do this for the simple reason that they don't have anywhere on their properties to *store* the leaves until pick-up week, and they don't want to have to move the leaves twice, once to a storage area and later to the street.

Unlike areas with more continental climates east of the Cascades, where the leaves come tumbling down over a period of only two or three weeks, fall is a long, drawn-out affair here in the maritime Northwest. The first trees to lose their leaves in Eugene (mostly ash species) begin to drop them in late September and early October. By the end of October, many other deciduous trees have dropped their leaves, as well—but there are still more to come in November. Eugene's Public Works crews generally don't begin picking up leaves until mid-November or later. In



In some communities, it is illegal to pile leaves in the street.

were removed were not re-distributed near the site where they fell—to recycle their nutrients and provide all the other benefits of fallen leaves—but were either burned or removed from the site and dumped in a landfill.

These days, for environmental reasons, the burning of leaves is prohibited in most communities, and leaves are no longer hauled to landfills. Most people deal with the leaves

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the meantime, the leaves piled in the streets by residents cause a variety of problems—from creating a safety issue for pedestrians and cyclists, to clogging storm drains—despite the best efforts of City staff to prevent those problems.

Eventually, sometime in January most years, Eugene’s



The clogging of storm drains is just one of the many problems that fallen leaves can cause if they are not removed from the street properly and promptly.

streets are largely cleared of leaves, following the expenditure of an enormous amount of time, labor, and fossil fuels to remove and “re-distribute” the leaves. These days, the leaf removal program is funded by stormwater fees that every city property owner pays. Most people think the program works well, and of course everyone is happy once the streets have been cleared. But is there possibly a better way?

In preparing this article, the leaf programs of five other municipalities were examined, including four here in the Willamette Valley—Springfield, Corvallis, Salem, and Portland—as well as one out-of-state program in Loveland, Colorado. Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, no two of the six programs were alike. Every community has its own way of dealing with fallen leaves, and every person interviewed felt that his or her program works well.

All six communities recycle/compost their leaves—to keep them from ending up in the local landfill. Some cities have fairly simple systems and rules to follow regarding leaf removal; others are quite complicated. One of the biggest differences among the six cities, however, regards how they treat leaves that fall on *private* property versus those that fall on *public* property.

In Eugene, for instance, there is no distinction. All leaves placed in the street are picked up, regardless of where they came from. The situation is identical in Corvallis and

Portland. In Springfield, crews collect leaves from private property but *only* if they are put into plastic trash sacks and placed curbside for pick-up by the local waste-hauler (for eventual composting).

In both Salem and Loveland, it is the responsibility of the property owner to remove the leaves that have fallen on their own property as well as those on the publicly-owned park strips between curb and sidewalk that are by law maintained by adjacent property owners in most communities. Salem and Loveland then use street sweepers and other machinery to remove only those leaves that have fallen onto the street. And both Salem and Loveland have free drop-off sites where residents can haul the leaves from their properties themselves and at their own expense. (Those leaves are then composted by the municipality.)

Among the cities that accept leaves from both private and public property—other than Springfield and its bag-your-own program—there are also differences. Eugene generally makes two sweeps through each neighborhood, one in November/December and one in January, and the program is funded by stormwater fees, as mentioned above. Corvallis’s waste hauler picks up leaves placed in the street weekly (!) during the fall, and the cost of the program is included in all Corvallis residents’ monthly fee for trash collection.

Okay, are you ready for the next example? In Portland, the parts of the city where there are “high concentrations of mature trees”—which are scattered throughout the city—are divided into 30 “leaf removal zones,” 18 of which are serviced twice in fall, and 12 just once. Residents in the leaf removal zones must pay an annual fee of \$15-30 (\$5-10 for low-income residents) for leaf removal, but they may “opt-out” of the program either by assuring the City that they will be providing all leaf removal themselves, or by having no trees in their yards or along the street that can drop leaves into the street. If a resident wishes to opt-out, however, there is first an Opt-Out Application to complete. That leads to an Opt-Out Evaluation, which may result in an Opt-Out Approval and Notification—unless, of course, the application is denied. If it’s denied, there is still the possibility of filing an Opt-out Appeal. (Oh, and by the way, Portland residents who do succeed in getting an Opt-Out Approval must apply *annually* for a leaf removal program opt-out “because conditions change.”) Any questions about how this little program works? Phew!

Although the supervisors of all six programs say they are content with how things work overall in their respective communities, an outside observer might well reach another conclusion. Some programs appear far more efficient at getting the job of leaf removal done than others do. Of those communities that accept leaves from private property—Eugene, Springfield, Corvallis, and Portland—Corvallis’s system appears to work the best (again, *weekly* pick-up is provided by the local waste hauler for a fee that is included in the monthly waste-hauling fee).



Leaves that are repeatedly run over by cars become a real hazard and are difficult to remove.

The supervisors of the leaf removal programs in Salem and Loveland both agreed that permitting residents to place leaves from their own properties—and from the park strips in front of their properties—into the street for pick-up by the municipality amounts to a significant and unfair subsidy. Homeowners who choose to manage their own leaves by using them on-site or by paying someone to haul them off end up subsidizing those homeowners who, for whatever reasons, just push their leaves out into the street.

Of course, in Portland, homeowners who receive an Opt-Out Approval don't pay any fee and therefore do not directly subsidize the leaf removal program. But the Approval itself comes at a cost, both to the property owner who takes the time every year to apply for it as well as, surely, to the municipality that administers the complex program.

There may indeed be no perfect approach to leaf removal. But after examining the programs in these six communities, it appears that Salem and Loveland—where the municipality is responsible for removing the leaves that fall onto *public* property (the street) and property owners are responsible for removing the leaves from their *private* properties as well as the park strips at their own expense—have the most efficient, equitable, and simple programs for leaf removal. Just some food for thought for the other four cities in this survey.

Whitey Lueck is a horticulturist and naturalist, and an instructor with the University of Oregon's Department of Landscape Architecture.

Please help Friends of Trees continue to engage volunteers to plant and care for trees and natural areas. Use the enclosed donation envelope or donate online FriendsOfTrees.org.

Thanks so much

to all FOT's donors who have given generously in 2013! We are grateful for all your support. We are also grateful to City of Eugene, Lane County, and City of Springfield for their support of the Friends of Trees Neighborhood Tree program. In November, we signed a contract with City of Eugene supporting FOT's community forestry programs. We are excited to continue building our Neighborhood Tree program and pruning program and build on our excellent partnership with City of Eugene Parks and Open Space.

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California Black Oak

Quercus kelloggii

By Aaron Lesan and Erik Burke

In this newsletter we spotlight another tree that may be well suited for a warming climate in Eugene-Springfield. California black oak (*Quercus kelloggii*) is one of our two native oaks, along with Oregon white oak (*Q. garryana*). FOT has identified this beautiful oak as a top candidate to add to the street trees we plant in Eugene and Springfield.

Other common names for California black oak include Kellogg oak or simply black oak. *Quercus kelloggii* is an oak in the “red oak” section of the genus *Quercus*, and is closely related to the black oak (*Q. velutina*) found in eastern and central North America. California black oak is the only western oak species in the red oak subgenus that is deciduous. It readily hybridizes with other oaks in the red oak subgenus, most notably with interior live oak (*Q. wislizeni*), creating the natural hybrid called Oracle oak. California black oak ranges from Lane County south into Mexico, and is the most widely distributed species of the western oaks.

California black oak is a fast growing and long-lived tree. It has excellent fall color, is extremely drought tolerant, and is an outstanding habitat tree. It is deciduous, with

simple, alternately arranged leaves 3-8 inches long that are sharply cut into 7-11 toothed lobes. While individual trees generally have a lifespan between 100 and 200 years, California black oak can live up to 500 years of age. It typically attains heights of 30-80 feet and 1-4.5 feet in diameter.

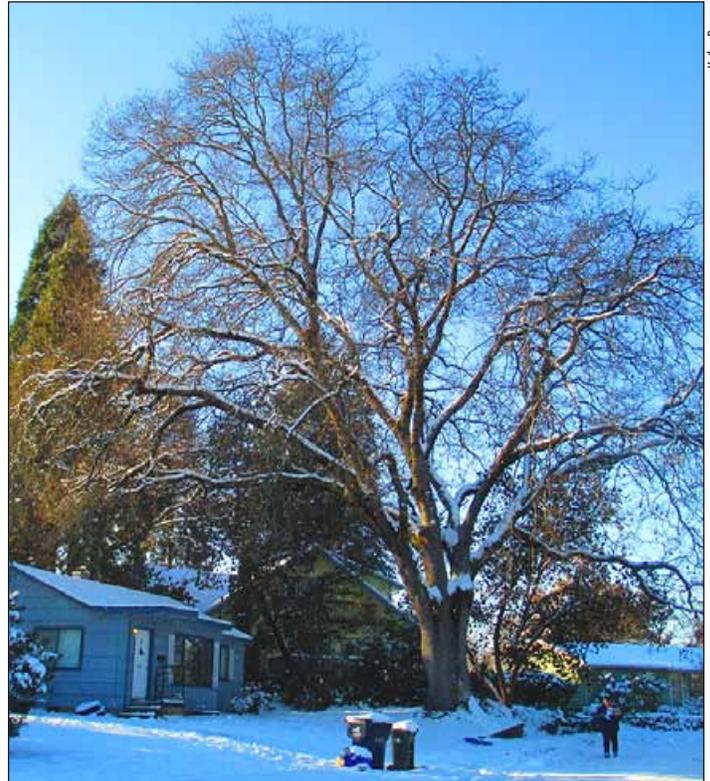
The national champion California black oak is found, not surprisingly, in Groveland, California, near the west



Massive California black oak at the entrance to Yosemite National Park.

entrance to Yosemite National Park. This massive specimen is nearly 7.5 feet in diameter, with a height of 91 feet and crown spread of 78 feet. As you can see, it dwarfs one of the fellows who nominated it in 2007.

The Oregon champion *Quercus kelloggii*, which is still pending verification at this time, is located in Lane County. It's nearly as big as the national champion, with a diameter at breast height of 6.3 feet, a height of 105 feet and crown



Kelko Brynn

One of Eugene's loveliest black oaks, near 18th and McKinley.

spread of 80 feet. On the American Forest point scale, it trails the California tree by only 29 points.

California black oak has many uses. It is the major hardwood sawn into lumber in California. California black oak is a key species for wildlife, and it occupies more total area in California than any other hardwood species. The acorns of California black oak are relatively large, from 1 to 1.2 inches long and 0.6 to 0.7 inch wide. They are one of the most desirable and heavily used acorns as foods among native people.

One concern about growing California black oak is that it is sensitive to sudden oak death (*Phytophthora ramorum*), a fungal disease. According to Alan Kanaskie, with Oregon Department of Agriculture, sudden oak death (SOD) is unlikely to spread and thrive in drier inland valleys, and SOD is not a major concern for black oak in the southern Willamette Valley.

FOT is currently planting small California black oaks in natural areas and yards. We believe these oaks are also well-suited to be street trees for eight-foot-wide and greater planting strips on the valley floor and in the foothills. Trees of street tree grade (1.5-inch caliper) are currently unavailable in the nursery industry in Oregon, but the oak is grown to that size in California. It was widely used historically as a

street tree in California, and is on the approved street tree lists for several California cities.

FOT is working with the nursery industry to develop local nursery sources of street-tree-grade trees of known provenance or source. Unlike Oregon white oak, California black oak can be transplanted bare-root during the dormant season; and it can be grown from acorn to street tree in three years, compared to four or five years for Oregon white oak. In spring 2013, with financial support from the City of Eugene Sustainability Office, FOT bought black oak liners

(seedlings) from Sevenoaks Native Nursery grown from two seed sources in Oregon and northern California. Eugene Wholesale Nursery planted them in March 2013, along with liners of three other drought-tolerant species. Of the four species in

the initial trial, the black oaks established best and grew rapidly (see photo). By next fall, we hope to be planting locally-grown black oaks on Eugene streets.

California black oak has a long history of providing benefits to our local ecosystems. These beautiful trees are major contributors to our community, and deserve a place both along our streets and as part of the landscape of Eugene and Springfield.

Aaron is an Oregon native who volunteers his time to help preserve our natural environment. He lives in Corvallis with his wife and two children.

Erik Burke



California black oak seedling

Season Kick-Off

FOT began the 2013-14 season in a big way by training 40 new crew leaders on November 7th at the Stellaria Building. We are excited to have so much new blood and wonderful support! The new crew leaders got right to work at two plantings in Santa Clara, on November 8th and 9th, both meeting at Irving Elementary School. On the 8th, 18 crew leaders supported 70 fifth graders in planting 16 trees on their school grounds. The planting with the kids was an absolute blast. Thanks to FOT crew leader and ex-teacher Jon Kline for keeping the event well organized. On the 9th, 16 crew leaders led 60 community volunteers in planting 38 more trees. Most of the trees were on Hyacinth Street as part of a Safe Routes to Schools Project funded by Lane County. Friends of Trees is grateful for a contract from Lane County and a sponsorship from EWEB to fund our work on this planting.



Santa Clara planting photos by Marion Fargrith

Clockwise from above: A great turn-out of fifth graders on the Nov. 8th planting in Santa Clara; Jeff Lanza, Planting Manager shows how it's done; little hands guide the tree as it's planted; mulch for the young trees; Eugene Director, Erik Burke, helps get this tree planted properly.





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Upcoming Neighborhood Tree Plantings

Join FOT volunteers at a planting in a Eugene or Springfield neighborhood!

Jan. 18, 2014, North Eugene

Jan. 20, 2014, MLK Day of Service

Mar. 1, 2014, West Eugene

Mar. 8, 2014, Springfield

Apr. 5, 2014, All Eugene-Springfield

Apr. 12, 2014, Arbor Day

All plantings are Saturday from 9am-1pm except for the January 20th event. Check our schedule online for details at <http://www.friendsoftrees.org/plant/calendars/eugene-springfield>. Watch the online calendar for new volunteer pruning events and plantings in partnership with ODOT coming up in February.



Jessica Burke

Arbor Day planting, 2012

If you would like to sign up for a tree for your home during one of our upcoming season plantings, sign up online at <https://friendsoftrees.org/plant-it-programs>, or call our office at 541-632-3683.