
Opinion

SUSTAINABLE MARBLEHEAD: The many benefits of trees

By Palma Bickford and Louise Bullis Yarmoff

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The term “leafy suburb” has long been associated with an attractive and healthy place to live. In Marblehead over the past decades, concerned citizens and town employees have worked to plant and preserve trees to maintain our town’s tree canopy, which is important not just for the beauty and shade trees offer but also for the critical impact they have in absorbing carbon from the atmosphere.

Unfortunately, in recent years, Marblehead’s tree canopy has started to shrink. According to Tree Department data, only two new trees have been planted in the past three years on town-owned land, and 474 trees have been removed. In the context of stretched municipal budgets, trees in our town are in danger of becoming a “nice to have” and not a “must have.”

A sound business case can be made for investing in trees. Research shows that trees clean and cool the air, promote exercise and improve mental health. By removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, trees mitigate the carbon pollution we produce when we heat and cool our houses and drive our cars. They intercept rainfall and prevent runoff into storm drains.

The Nature Conservancy has estimated that, based on trees’ health and environmental benefits, their rates of return in many cases exceed those of for-profit businesses. A 2015 study in California by the U.S. Forest Service and the University of California, Davis, found that for every \$1 spent in California cities on tree planting and maintenance, there was \$5.82 in economic benefits. Health researchers have also documented specific cardiovascular health benefits from living in greener environments.

Article 9 on the Marblehead Town Meeting warrant, “Purchase and Planting of Trees,” although recommended for indefinite postponement by the Finance Committee, serves an important purpose by raising the issue for further discussion. As one towns person, a landscape architect who spoke at the Finance Committee meeting, put it, “We need a plan.”

Sustainable Marblehead has formed a Tree Committee with the goal of helping the town come up with just such a plan. We invite all interested residents to join us in working with the town to help develop and execute a viable tree planting and preservation strategy. We have already met with Town Manager Jason Silva and commend him for his interest in this issue and eagerness to learn more.

Many towns have adopted volunteer tree commissions that research funding sources and write grant proposals, develop youth programs, help maintain tree nurseries, support community education programs, and help monitor tree health. Over the past 10 years, the city of Somerville, for example, has increased its number of trees from 11,000 to 14,000 by both removing diseased trees and planting hundreds of new ones.

An important first step is conducting a reliable tree inventory. In 1999, the Marblehead Parks and Recreation Department completed a tree inventory with a group of volunteers. That inventory, along with last year’s Salem Sound Coastwatch photographic survey done as part of the town’s climate vulnerability planning process, would be a good starting point for a new inventory. Free software such as iTree is also available to help with inventory collection, analysis and planning.

Another important ingredient for tree health is hiring a qualified arborist to be our tree warden, following the retirement of our current warden, who can create a multiyear plan for maintenance and planting of appropriate tree species for specific locations. For example, planting shorter trees under utility lines would reduce the danger that falling limbs might take out utilities. Placing trees that can thrive in boxed containers would avoid roots interfering with underground utilities.

It is also important that we coordinate our activities with other town departments and organizations, such as the town’s Complete Streets effort to improve pedestrian access, the Marblehead Conservancy’s Arbor Day and other

activities, and the town's many garden clubs whose members care deeply about trees and plants. During the drafting of Article 9, the Chamber of Commerce was also consulted and stated that it was in favor of beautifying the commercial areas of town with additional trees to boost retail traffic.

A planned and coordinated effort will go a long way towards creating a healthy tree canopy that will beautify our town and make it a healthier place for all of us to live. If you would like to join us in this important effort, please contact us at sustainablemarblehead@gmail.com.

Palma Bickford and Louise Bullis Yarmoff are members of the Sustainable Marblehead Tree Committee.

Upcoming events

Earth Week: April 22-26. Earth Week activities will take place at various schools. For information: sustainablemarblehead@gmail.com.

"Greening Your Business": 6:30-8 p.m. April 25 at Masonic Temple, 62 Pleasant St., Marblehead. Cost: free, chamber members; \$15, nonmembers. The Marblehead Chamber of Commerce will host the program. To register: To register: info@marbleheadchamber.org.

Bike Rodeo: 2-4 p.m. April 28 at Tower School, 75 W. Shore Drive, Marblehead. Free. Bike Marblehead will host its Bike Rodeo.

Pesticide-free lawn and garden care: 7-8:30 p.m. May 1 at Abbot Public Library, 235 Pleasant St., Marblehead. Free. Chip Osborne will present the program, hosted by Sustainable Marblehead.

Green Energy home and car show: 3:30-5:30 p.m. May 19 at Tower School, 75 W. Shore Drive, Marblehead.