

Trees That Like the City



We thought that we would never see a Crimson Cloud hawthorne, Allegheny serviceberry or Carolina silverbell as a New York City tree; but these exotic-sounding varieties are among those recommended by the Department of City Planning and the New York Botanical Garden for planting on city streets. What do they have in common with the Ohio buckeye and little-leaf linden besides seductive names? The same thing that all New Yorkers have in common:

stamina and the will to survive. According to the city guide, the 99 trees suggested for New York "have proved themselves able to grow under duress in the abusive city environment." They have made it against the odds. Our response is instant empathy.

The one thing you cannot take away from New Yorkers is an almost irrational response to trees. They revere them as isolated miracles in concrete reality. A few city Scrooges cut trees down and neaten things up with cement; we know one family that was isolated by its neighbors for years after assassinating some spreading backyard ailanthuses. The ailanthus is a weed to botanical cognoscenti, but to New Yorkers it is the properly named Tree of Heaven, and like New York, it has a kind of immortality. An empty-lot lush, it can grow aggressively where there is no soil at all.

The City Planning Department brochure describes

small, medium and large trees with classier pedigrees that can pass the survival test and that require minimum maintenance. Street trees are nominally under city care, but minimum or no maintenance is the rule. The guide gives soil and light preferences and hints on nurturing: Be sensitive to the needs of each tree and respond to any signals of distress. That, alas, is considerably more than New Yorkers do for each other.

The experts would like to see a variety of trees planted, so that a disease or blight affecting one kind will not strip the city of its foliage. The hardier trees they recommend are starred, and there are addresses to write to for advice—a horticultural hotline.

A comprehensive plan for street trees was developed by the city in 1917. Today, private block associations are doing the job on an ad hoc basis. There are clouds of pink blossoms on Upper East Side streets in the spring; private philanthropy has made the center of Park Avenue a mall of flowering fruit trees; less affluent neighborhoods hold block parties to raise funds to plant trees. One Brooklyn neighborhood has just publicly mourned the death of an elm. Homeowners are judged for character according to whether or not they choose to plant. By their ginkgos, London planes or honey locusts shall you know them.

Something happens to all New York trees, no matter how plain or fancy their origins. They become like street children—street-tough and neglected, growing without attention, resilient yet beautiful. And no matter how much earnest talk there is about combating pollution through vegetation, the need of New Yorkers to plant has deeper roots. The city tree and the city-dweller are so very much alike.