

# BUCKEYE IN THE ROCKIES: A 2005 EXCHANGE PROGRAM REPORT

by Wendi Crabill, Southwest Ohio Regional Urban Forester, Division of Forestry



Wendi Crabill (far left) with the Denver Division of Natural Resources staff (left to right) Ted Tompkins, Doug Schoch, Jude O'Connor, Lori Biewick, Dawn Ibarra, Mike Swanson, Dave Romero, Jim Myer

As one of six regional urban foresters for the Ohio DNR, Division of Forestry, I serve 14 counties in southwest Ohio where I assist cities, villages, and townships in developing tree programs. My belief is that the more I learn, the more I have to offer the communities that we serve.

Through SMA's urban forestry exchange program, I had the opportunity to shadow natural resource managers in Denver, Colorado. I wasn't sure what to expect from Denver—for one thing, I thought it would be more hilly—but what did live up to my expectations was the generosity and welcome from my hosts.

Denver has had a city forester since 1904 and has a long history of valuing its trees. Denver City Forester and Director of Natural Resources Jude O'Connor hosted my visit and organized my itinerary. Jude never tired of my questions and was willing to share what she has learned through her experiences.

Denver's program encompasses all of its urban natural resources, including water conservation, natural areas, mountain parks, and the urban forest. Jude and her staff strive to manage their city as an entire urban ecosystem rather than merely reacting to tree problems.

Denver's natural resource division has its own tree nursery and an impressive greenhouse. Three tree-trimming crews maintain parkways, parks, and municipal golf courses. Denver's parkways are beautiful, tree-lined streets with large medians and space for large shade trees on each side. The division contracts pruning for

one entire parkway per year and does hazard removals as needed.

Homeowners are responsible for caring for street trees adjacent to their lots. The city is divided into four areas with an urban forestry inspector for each area. The inspectors respond to residents' requests and also watch for hazardous trees, tree diseases, and code violations. When an inspector identifies a hazardous tree, the city sends out a notice to the homeowner. If the homeowner fails to address the tree, the natural resources division contracts the work out on the homeowner's behalf. Denver accommodates the homeowner by setting up a payment plan to repay the city ten percent each month, interest-free.

This approach to street tree management has been successful in

hazard mitigation for the ROW, something I believe is one of the most important parts of an urban forestry program. On the other hand, the effects of homeowner responsibility are being felt as Denver attempts to reach its goal of 18 percent canopy coverage. My prediction is that Denver homeowners will continue to refuse to replant the removed trees as long as they are responsible for the maintenance of the ROW trees. My experiences in Ohio have been that canopy goals are more likely to be reached when the municipality takes care of public trees.

One of my favorite aspects of Denver's program is the mandatory tree company licensing program. Denver offers a licensed contractor list to residents and business owners. To be on the list, a tree company must have minimum insurance and pass both a written and field test. The impact of having qualified tree companies available to citizens is a higher quality of tree work in Denver.

It was comforting to see in Denver many of the same trees with which I'm familiar in Ohio: honeylocust, ash, maple, oak, linden, and elm. Surprisingly, trees that are often on Ohio prohibited tree lists—catalpa, hackberry, and black walnut—were widely planted in Denver. I chalk it up to the harsher growing conditions and lack of water, limiting the species selection.

It was interesting to learn that the only trees originally growing in Denver were cottonwoods and willows along the creeks, a fact that makes the tree-lined parkways and mature parks that much more amazing. In Denver I saw whole streetscapes of mature American elms as I have only seen in old photos. A few inhabit-

*continued...*

## Vital Statistics, Denver, Colorado

- **Population:** 554,636
- **Tree Population:** Park/Parkway/Golf Courses 75,000; Street Trees 150,000
- **Full-time Forestry Staff:** 24
- **Management Plan:** Not current
- **Street Tree Inventory:** Yes, currently updating to GIS
- **Pruning Cycle:** 7 years for parkways, 10 years for others
- **Most Common Trees:**
  - Green Ash
  - Siberian Elm
  - American Elm
  - Colorado Spruce
  - Austrian Pine
  - Silver Maple
  - Honeylocust
  - Norway Maple
  - Linden
  - White Ash
  - Plains Cottonwood
  - Crabapple

**Biggest Challenge:** Reaching our goal of 18% tree canopy cover and finding meaningful incentives and educational programs to encourage homeowners to grow street trees

**Volunteers:** Our non-profit partner The Park People, their Denver Digs Trees tree giveaway program, and our trained Community Foresters

**Source of Pride:** Trees as the backbone of the landscape in our historic park, parkway, and mountain park system



### **Musashino Japanese Zelkova** *Zelkova serrata 'Musashino'*

Tightly upright branches render this tree ideal for use along narrow streets.

It grows as a very narrow vase: 45' tall by 20' wide.

The dark green leaf color holds throughout summer and turns a rusty red in autumn.

Adaptable from zones 5 to 9.

Trained and pruned to develop matched specimens and maintained with a 6' to 7' clear trunk to offer ample pedestrian and vehicular clearance.

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**Denver's Civic Center Park is at the heart of the city.**

ants I won't be seeing at work in Ohio are prairie dogs, bison, and elk that live in preserves in Denver city parks.

Most communities use contractors for pruning or removals, but I doubt many towns have contractors quite like those in Denver. Their contractors are furry, walk on four legs, and make their living by eating. Yes, a goat herd is contracted to eat invasive weeds in city parks, and it seemed to me that everyone was happy with their work.

I was shocked at the extent of the water issues in Denver. They spend \$2 million annually on water to keep their trees growing well. I admire this kind of resource dedication to keep their trees



Denver tree-trimming crews maintain trees along parkways and in parks and municipal golf courses.

healthy and looking good. As I saw more of the city, I was in awe at how green and lush their public spaces are and wondered how Ohio communities would fare if all of their trees had to be irrigated regularly to thrive.

One of Denver's biggest challenges is "scraped" homes in older neighborhoods and the resulting loss of tree canopy. "Scraped" refers to when developers purchase multiple houses and demolish them to make room for one big house. The process could potentially destroy all the trees in the front yards and the general canopy coverage of these older neighborhoods. Denver has a new tree protection ordinance to save both private and public trees in these areas. It requires

permits and construction requirements for any work performed near public trees that are at least 6" (15 cm) DBH. City staff work with the contractor to protect valuable trees, but if the trees are removed, the developer or homeowner is assessed the value of the trees.

Denver is a beautiful city with amazing trees. The best part, though, was the people. It was great to talk to everyone and learn from other people's experiences. It just goes to show that good programs reflect the good people who run them. Thanks to Jude for being such a gracious host. Thanks to Doug Still and the SMA Municipal Arborist Exchange committee for making this opportunity available, as well as Altec Industries Inc. for their financial support of this year's exchanges.

Later this year, I will be hosting Shawn Dickerson from Evansville, Indiana for a week. I look forward to sharing the great urban forestry programs that we have here in southwest Ohio with my guest. 🍃

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