



ROUND TABLE

Memorial Trees

The concept of honoring a loved one with a tree has universal appeal, but the reality of managing memorial trees in our urban forests is complex. Here, we get perspectives from Steve Cothrel of Upper Arlington, Ohio; George Gonzalez of Los Angeles; Gene Hyde of Chattanooga, Tennessee; Nick Kuhn of Albuquerque, New Mexico; Gordon Mann of the Sacramento Tree Foundation; and Walt Warriner of Santa Monica, California.

We have a brochure to publicize our commemorative tree program, and most trees go into parks. Schools and libraries also participate, but we don't control that land, so unlike park trees, those trees are on their own after planting. Trees are usually 2- to 2.5-inch (5-6 cm) caliper, and cost is a flat rate \$180. We plant 98% of them, and location/species are determined by mutual agreement between the donors and me. We try to be flexible regarding ceremonies to accommodate donors, and some get pretty creative. We also have families that decorate "their" trees for major (and minor) holidays or otherwise pamper their special trees.

We don't allow plaques, as we don't want our parks to look like cemeteries, nor do we want to constantly buy new plaques when they become damaged or disappear. Instead, we list donations in the Commemorative Tree Book at the library, and we present certificates to donors/honorees. This alternative to dozens of mismatched plaques has worked well for us. For those who really want a plaque, we offer commemorative park benches (\$800). The donor must provide the bronze plaque at their own expense (after we approve text), and we set it in the wet concrete pad when installing the bench. Some folks donate a tree and a bench so they can relax in the shade while visiting their favorite park.

Information about our program is on our Web site at www.ua-ohio.net/parksrec/forestry/comm.

—Steve Cothrel, Superintendent of Parks and Forestry, Upper Arlington, Ohio



Memorial plaque in Strongsville, Ohio Photos: Jennifer Milbrandt

In Los Angeles our policy is easy: The city attorney said that we shall not allow memorial trees—and we don't. That has served us well for many years; however, now with the Million Trees LA Initiative (MTLA), we have found that many people want to plant memorial trees and/or groves.

Now we're trying to change our long-standing policy to allow these types of memorials. I have mixed feelings about it because once you allow this, the trees take on a symbolic meaning—and for urban forest managers it becomes more difficult to deal with these trees as simply infrastructure elements. But since we are under a lot of pressure to increase the number of trees planted, particularly by community groups, this looks like a can of worms that we may be willing to open ... stay tuned for the results!

—George Gonzalez, Chief Forester, Los Angeles, California

Idon't fully embrace the idea of memorial trees for one simple reason. Frequently the donor associates one specific tree with their newly departed loved one. Then the donors/loved ones transfer all of the emotion from their loved one to that special tree, and heaven help you if a leaf on that tree turns brown! I've been down that unhappy road and I don't intend to make a return trip.

I handle memorial tree requests in the following manner. When I get one of these requests I say that we'll plant a tree somewhere in the City as part of an overall planting plan. For this purpose I'll charge \$250.00. We can tell you the street, but we won't designate an individual tree nor do we permit special plaques for a tree.



Memorial tree in Strongsville, Ohio

And as the city forester, I choose the species that gets planted. Take it or leave it. Some do, some don't.

If you do decide to pursue memorial plantings as an option for your program, develop a very firm set of rules that favors the realities of your operations.

–Gene Hyde, City Forester, Chattanooga, Tennessee

At my last city, when requests came in for a memorial tree, folks would get to pick the tree species from my approved list and then we picked the spot. If they had a spot in mind, we told them what species could go there. We bought the tree or allowed them to get it from an approved nursery. They paid for the cost of the tree and cost of their choice of marker, a little metal sign (\$75) or a carved rock (\$250). We paid for maintenance thereafter.

One time a guy come onto city property and topped his memorial tree, so we cut it down. I didn't know it was him, so I called to tell him the tree is gone but I would replace it. He was angry since he felt he had just done a great pruning job and all his work was a waste. The city leaders didn't like him doing work on city property without talking to us first, so his many complaints about the tree removal were ignored. I also had someone who kept sprinkling Sevin dust all over a memorial cherry

placed at a playground, and we had an ongoing battle over that.

Here in Albuquerque, we have a short list of approved species for memorial planting. We approve the site; they pay cost of tree and a very small marker. Problems occur when vandalism or some project damages or restricts access to the tree, but replacements are covered by the city. Trees cost more here and the markers are very small and kept inside the mulch ring.

My observation about such programs is that they are good PR for the city, but they can be a headache when people become not just attached, but obsessed with tree care or every little problem. However, in my opinion, it's worth the headache if you set up some good rules first.

—Nick Kuhn, City Forester, Albuquerque, New Mexico

When I was Redwood City's urban forester, we planted an Arbor Day tree every year honoring a community member. The Native Daughters hosted a great community event, there was a council proclamation, our local non-profit donated the redwood tree, and the mayor accepted the tree and recognized the deserving citizen. A plaque was placed at the base of the tree: a simple four-by-six-inch plate set on a concrete base at grade and placed in the soil outside the soil berm surrounding the root ball. The park has a large number of memorial trees and most people seem to be okay with that, as the plaques are pretty inconspicuous and there is room for many more trees. People who have had trees planted in their honor pay attention to the condition of the trees and contact staff if they think the tree needs some attention.

We reviewed other memorial tree requests on a case-by-case basis. There were no plaques allowed other than the City's dedicated trees, which are all planted in a park area. If a resident wanted to plant a dedicated tree, they could plant it on their own property or take out a street tree permit—and we'd note it was a dedicated tree. We treated it like a street tree. We did consider planting dedicated trees without plaques in some visible medians or islands that had space for trees. We did allow one large boxed *Magnolia soulangiana* to be planted as a memorial to replace a tree that died in a park several years ago. The tree is doing well, and we haven't heard from the donor.

I suggest minimizing concerns by selecting the species you are confident are going to be very hardy, setting the expectation that the tree is the City's and will be maintained like the other trees, and if for some reason, the tree fails, dies, or is vandalized, it will be replaced with a new tree of "x" size, unless the donors wish to upgrade the nursery stock.

If you provide someone a thank you letter stating the memorial tree will be cared for under the City's maintenance policies and set the expectations that trees are living things and their longevity cannot be guaranteed, and explain the rules for replacement, it minimizes the follow-up complaints and gives you something to point back to.

In Redwood City, we didn't publicize memorial trees. If we advertised, we probably could have received more requests. Since the funding for tree planting was not an issue, donations weren't a necessity to plant trees. If funding is an issue, memorial trees or trees funded by individuals could be a way to obtain money to plant trees.

We can have similar resident concerns over a street or park tree that is not doing well whether it is a memorial tree or not. The sentimental issue is a consideration to take into account in your maintenance program. Good up-front rules and expectations on the tree planting and care help to deflect and respond to the individual requests for special attention.

At the Sacramento Tree Foundation, we are working on both Carbon Offset planting and memorial planting programs as sources of funding tree purchases. We see an increased need to track these locations (using GIS) and verify the survival and continued existence (even through replacement) of these trees—and the purchase prices will include prorated future replacement costs based on historical survival data.

—Gordon Mann, Urban Forest Services Director, Sacramento Tree Foundation

We have several memorial trees around Santa Monica that we have to pay special attention to on a regular basis because of their sentimental value. If they show any kind of stress, we'll get a call from someone.

When I was city forester for another city I had to remove a *Liquidambar* tree as part of a large median landscape project. As soon as that tree was down I got a call from the woman who planted the tree 15 years earlier in memory of her son who had died; she was incredibly upset (and rightfully so). She even had a special little certificate that the City had given to her, which I knew nothing about.

I always try to discourage people from planting a memorial tree on public property, as that tree then becomes subject to any kind of changes that may take place in the near and/or distant future and the person that planted the memorial tree has no control over that action.

Santa Monica's new policy is that when residents want to plant a tree, they can donate money to a special reforestation fund which is used to plant trees. We don't indicate where the tree was planted, or even what kind, just a letter thanking them for their donation.

—Walt Warriner, Community Forester, Santa Monica, California 