



If trees could talk . . . they would tell the province to protect them the way we do heritage property

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Will rare and culturally significant trees across Ontario soon join heritage properties in the important to-be-preserved category? The Ontario Urban Forest Council certainly hopes so and is working with the Ministry of Culture to widen the Ontario Heritage Act so that botanical specimens can be protected, a move that would clarify what Toronto's new tree bylaw fails to spell out.

Passed last September, the city bylaw protects private property trees measuring 30 centimetres in diameter at 1.4 metres above ground level. To cut down such a tree, you need a permit from the city's urban forestry services unless it's dead, terminally diseased or hazardous.

Still, the bylaw neglects the specific preservation of heritage trees. "There are so many infill housing developments, and the city doesn't have enough staff to monitor it all," says Jack Radecki, executive director of the Ontario Urban Forest Council (OUFC). "It's important to identify heritage trees in Toronto so there is a record of them."

OUFC members pushing for the provincial amendment are compiling criteria in order to develop a registry for unusual species, trees that have reached a great age or are culturally or historically meaningful. Radecki says his group knows that communities have particular attachments to certain trees, and hopes to create an inventory of these. The OUFC is recommending clearer definitions of "heritage trees" in amendments to the Ontario Heritage Act currently being debated by the province.

But the province says it's the municipality's job to designate. "A municipality is given the right through the act to designate properties as historical, such as a tree," says Ministry of Culture spokesperson Lisa Robart. "Then it can pass a bylaw to protect it. The OUFC is trying to make definitions of 'properties' clearer, but we're saying we want municipalities deciding what constitutes a heritage property."

Under the current Ontario Heritage Act, trees that happen to be on a heritage property don't necessarily get a historical designation. According to the ministry's Web site, there are six trees listed in the Ontario Heritage Properties Database.

Among the 7,000 heritage sites in Toronto, only a few trees located on them are listed under the act (see related article above). "We don't have very many situations where trees are designated," says city preservation officer Brian Gallagher. "But in the few cases we have, it's always in association with a building."

In 2002, the Friends of the Don East performed a "trees count" in Cabbagetown, Riverdale, Leaside and East York. The study identified 83 potential heritage trees and found regionally rare trees - two very large white oaks and two honey locusts.

Trees can be rare in a community either because they seldom occur in native forests or they're not commonly used as landscape trees. The study notes that the maturity of many

trees, while contributing to neighbourhood aesthetics, real estate values and relief during heat waves, means that many parts of Toronto will soon face potentially significant tree loss. Councillor Joe Pantalone, the city's tree advocate, says people ought to think of heritage trees as heritage properties. "When you go into Queen's Park and say to somebody that we have to protect the forest, they won't get it. It's nice to have a forest in Algonquin Park, but it doesn't do us much good in the city. But if people start screaming for it, officials will listen."

In the meantime, the OUFC is proceeding with its criteria discussion. "These are the oldest living organisms," says Barbara Heidenreich of the Ontario Heritage Foundation, which is working with the OUFC. "Too many of them have been cut down, and we must do something as a province."