

Keep Calm and Plant Some Trees

A friend from Ottawa visited the other day, and as soon as she arrived, she pulled a copy of her local newspaper out of her purse and handed it to me.

"It's a gift," she said.

Okay, I thought. A little unusual, but I'll go with it.

"There's an article about trees in it," she added then proceeded to launch into another topic.

So I set the newspaper aside and almost forgot about it until this morning when I picked it up and read the front-page headline: "Tree Myths, Misconceptions and Why Planting Trees Is Good." And as I read the associated article, I realized that it really was a gift. The kind that will keep on giving if I can convince a majority of you to plant some trees next to your homes or businesses.

Now I know that a lot of you are heartbroken when your boulevard tree comes down, but I'll bet many of you don't have a single tree growing in your front or backyard lawns.

So why is that? Why are so many of people loathe to plant a tree next to their homes, despite the fact that a hefty full-grown tree – say, a Siberian Elm or a lovely Amur Cherry – can cool a house by 3 to 5 degrees in the summer, break the impact of fierce cold winds in the winter and just generally cheer-up the chemical gobbling expanse of grass that sits outside your door.

"They're messy," a neighbour proclaimed to me. "All those seeds and leaves. It drives me crazy cleaning it up." "They're dangerous," intones another who is obsessed with cutting down every tree within 15-foot radius of his home, in case one of them falls on his kid or damages his roof.

So are trees really all that messy, or worse, dangerous? Well look at this way - if you walk, bike, go to the gym, or obsessively mow your fertilizer guzzling lawn, what's so tough about sweeping up some seeds or raking up a few leaves? You get your steps in and you even get to do some bending and stretching. Or better still don't rake at all so our precious pollinators can overwinter in the leaves.

More importantly, if it's properly planted, cared for and pruned, its roots won't rise up to break your lawnmower nor will it fall down and smash things. If our city trees had been pruned prior to the October 2019 snowstorm, we wouldn't have spent \$10 million to clean up the mess.

Same goes for tree roots breaking into house foundations and sewer pipes and wrecking sidewalks. All three claims are urban legends. Tree roots may enter a crack in your foundation, but the crack has to be there first. Ditto your sewer pipe. Tree roots can't break through concrete, stone or cast iron; nor do they buckle sidewalks. In fact studies have shown that heaving walkways are generally the result of the wrong paving surface laid on the wrong soil.

So, why do trees get such a bad rap? Beats me. All I can see are their benefits. Which is why it pains me to see so much grass and worse, asphalt, taking up so much space in a city that's facing increasingly hot summers.

Truth is, we have enough private land in Winnipeg to plant 100s of thousands of heat-defying, carbon-sequestering trees. And given the number we're currently losing to Dutch Elm and other diseases, we better get cracking and plant them, before the full impact of climate change sets in.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not placing the burden for private property tree planting solely on the backs of homeowners. Far from it. There's ample land around hundreds of businesses. Just look at the front of the Federal Mint on Fermor – acres of lawn, with barely a tree in site. Or take a gander at new sub-divisions and infill projects that don't just fail to incorporate sufficient trees, but all too often mow them down.

And what about those oftentimes empty parking lots? Could developers not sacrifice half a dozen stalls for some trees, the shade of which actually improves the longevity of asphalt? Or better still, could the city not buy some of them up to create micro parks?

The work of expanding and protecting Winnipeg's tree canopy should be a top priority for everyone: from corporations, small businesses and homeowners to arts groups, developers and the construction industry.

The only question is will we do it? Or will we continue to buy into the myth that trees are destructive, instead of embracing the reality: that planting trees - our oxygen producing, pollution eating urban companions – could be the safest, easiest route to a more beautiful, healthy, climate resilient city.