



Urban Forests: A Natural History of Trees in the American Cityscape

Jill Jonnes

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A celebration of urban trees and the Americans—presidents, plant explorers, visionaries, citizen activists, scientists, nurserymen, and tree nerds—whose arboreal passions have shaped and ornamented the nation’s cities, from Jefferson’s day to the present

Nature’s largest and longest-lived creations, trees play an extraordinarily important role in our cityscapes, living landmarks that define space, cool the air, soothe our psyches, and connect us to nature and our past. Today, four fifths of Americans live in or near cities, surrounded by millions of trees, urban forests containing hundreds of species. Despite the ubiquity and familiarity of those trees, most of us take them for granted and know little of their specific natural history or civic virtues.

Jill Jonnes’s *Urban Forests* is a passionate, wide-ranging, and fascinating natural history of the tree in American cities over the course of the past two centuries. Jonnes’s survey ranges from early sponsors for the Urban Tree Movement to the fascinating stories of particular species (including Washington, DC’s famed cherry trees, and the American chestnut and elm, and the diseases that almost destroyed them) to the institution of Arbor Day to the most recent generation of tree evangelists who are identifying the best species to populate our cities’ leafy canopies. The book examines such questions as the character of American urban forests and the effect that tree-rich landscaping might have on commerce, crime, and human well-being. As we wrestle with how to repair the damage we have wrought on nature and how to slow climate change, urban forests offer an obvious, low-tech solution. (In 2006, U.S. Forest Service scientist Greg McPherson and his colleagues calculated that New York City’s 592,000 street trees annually saved \$28 million in energy costs through shading and cooling, or \$47.63 per tree.)

Urban Forests: A Natural History of Trees in the American Cityscape Details

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From Reader Review Urban Forests: A Natural History of Trees in the American Cityscape for online ebook

Robert says

Urban History is a brilliant study of the role of trees in the American city. Jill Jonnes weaves together the narratives of the dedicated people, the diverse species, and the invasive pests that have shaped urban forestry since the Revolutionary era. At times depressing, as it follows the loss of the American Chestnut and rise of Dutch Elm Disease, the work is also uplifting with its look at the scientists and activists who have changed our understanding of the benefits of urban forestry. Jonnes' study of the survivor trees of the Oklahoma City bombing and the 9/11 attack is particularly poignant. Ultimately, the reader is left with not only a better understanding of the history of urban forestry but is also inspired to become actively engaged in the continued struggle to maintain and expand our urban forests.

Sam says

An interesting topic, and I particularly enjoyed the first half of this book which focused on early urban forestry in the U.S. But this book was poorly organized and given the sometimes dense amount of information that was presented, it eventually became a distraction and difficult to keep track of the places and the people. Unfortunately, I think this did a disservice to the brilliant pioneers of Urban Forestry in the latter half of the 20th century and into 21st century as well.

Lynne says

I find this book fascinating; however, it is extremely difficult to read specifically not due to the authorship, but due to the font, the layout of said font, and the paper it is printed on. I would enjoy reading this much easier if the layout/font/paper had been picked for legibility. Having a flush right margin makes any book/magazine article/essay difficult to read...

Michele says

Urban Forests is a great study of the role of trees in US cities. Jill Jonnes weaves together the narratives of the dedicated people, the diverse species, and the invasive pests that have shaped urban forestry since the Revolutionary era. At times it can be depressing as it goes though the loss of the American Chestnut and rise of Dutch Elm Disease. But it can be uplifting with its look a the scientists and activists who have changed our understanding of the benefits of urban forestry and battled to bring the American Elm and American Chestnut back.

Jeff says

Well written and engaging book on urban forestry that revealed a lot of history that I wasn't familiar with. One key take-away, and cause for sadness given the current political situation is the importance of data-driven analysis and research to the preservation of our quality of life. Trees matter, and it's been a long battle to try to integrate our need for cities with our need for nature. Among the weird revelations for me was that George Bush was instrumental in funding this research, raising the departmental budgets tenfold after Reagan had totally defunded those departments. A highly recommended book.

Michael says

I enjoyed this book. It relates the history of our urban forestry movement from the earliest days to around 2014. Urban Forestry, Green Infrastructure, Urban Ecology, Ecological Landscaping, etc. all have evolved since this book was written. These fields are evolving fast as the world realizes that urbanization is the new global reality. The book spent a lot of time on the various diseases and pests that have devastated our forests (e.g. Chestnut blight, Dutch Elm disease, Emerald Ash Borer, Asian Longhorn beetle, etc.) and how we dealt with them, and how we need to be prepared for future infestations that threaten our trees and ecosystems.

Mitchell says

I bought this book without recommendation from a remainder store. It is a single topic nonfiction, in this case Urban Forests in the United States. Its got a lot of the topics I expected. The death of the Chestnut. The Death of the Elm. The discovery of the Dawn Redwood. But it also had the growth of arboreta and the economic valuation of an urban tree. And history around major figures and companies in Urban Forests. And somewhere in this somewhat sprawling somewhat disorganized and un-directed book, I realized I had looked up detail after detail, item after item, picture after picture. Not a great book or a quick read. And someone knowledgeable in the subject probably would learn a lot less. But fascinating and readable and I learned a lot.

Jeramey says

A collection of essays that provide an overview of the urban street tree, and more importantly the pests that assault them.

Informative, without a doubt, but it left me wondering about what can and will be done about so many of the pests. Are we screwed from globalization or will our trees and practices evolve?

Jennifer says

I have always loved trees, and this book made me want to plant more and more! "Trees--the noblest and proudest drapery that sets off the figure of our fair planet," wrote Andrew Jackson Downing in 1846, the

Martha Stewart of the day when it came to landscapes. From the beloved Arnold Arboretum in Boston to the epic battles to save the Chestnut to quantifying tree benefits, this book is inspiring. The city that has done the most to keep their canopy? NYC.

And of course, as the author notes, the most important reason to plant trees: "In certain forward-thinking cities... officials were now viewing trees as an essential part of green infrastructure, incorporating them into plans to cool down urban heat islands, clean polluted air, and mitigate the scourge of polluted storm water while providing the bonus of making city streets more beautiful, more healthful, and friendlier to humans."

Kate says

Fascinating information but poorly organized - jumped around from topic to topic with no coherent timeline or subject categorization. In many places, would have appreciated additional information about WHY something was happening, rather than a mere reporting it did happen. Four stars for information on urban forestry; two stars for the writing.

Aleta says

This is a good, readable history of tree activism over time. If you want to understand the great losses we have had of important American trees such as the chestnut and elm, this is an excellent first source. But beyond history, Jonnes shows how the human hope and energy applied in the past can help us move forward with the monumental new problems we face including invasive insects and climate change.

Ellen says

I found this book (while jumpy and sometimes slow moving) just the inspiration I needed. Reading about the rabble-rousing, seat-of-the-pants rise of Tree People in LA and how Boy Scouts were leveraged to bring back the American Elm made my heart swell and reflect on how I can make a difference in my own stick-to-the-rules no-budget urban forest. (Imma start MillionTreesBoston!)

Ellery says

For tree lovers, this book reads like part thriller: horror and dread as the author details the loss of millions of American trees over the past century, most notably the American chestnut, elm and ash as foreign invaders decimated our tree canopy.

But then we have a call to action as the book enables you to see the empty (and as the book details, health-impacting) urban spaces as potential spaces for tree planting. And each citizen must get involved, watering their trees, advocating for trees as public policy and maintaining the trees, as well as being on the lookout for the Asian Long-horned Beetle.

As a quote at the end of the book says, "Quick, name a climate solution for cities which helps lower carbon emissions, protects vulnerable people who live there, and even helps students get better grades? Give up? The answer is urban forests, and you're not alone if you didn't come up with the answer. After all, most of us

see trees as woven into our city streets as just a pretty, cinematic backdrop for urban life."

Phuong Q. Le says

Great information but the story telling is weak, slow, unnecessarily lengthy and disorganized. I didn't finish this book since I felt like I was reading entries from an encyclopedia.

Patty says

A nonfiction book that describes itself as "a passionate, wide-ranging, and fascinating natural history of the tree in American cities over the course of the past two centuries". I'm about to take issue with that blurb, but first I want to say that I did enjoy reading it.

My main complaint about this book is that it's not particularly focused on *urban* forests. Out of 21 chapters, one is about the canker that killed off the American Chestnut, four are on Dutch Elm Disease, one on the Emerald Ash Borer (a bug that attacks ash trees), and two on Asian Long-Horned Beetles (which kill several types of trees, but are particularly fond of maples). These are all interesting stories, and Elms and Ash and Maples do sometimes live in cities, but cities are very much not the focus of these sagas of disease and resistance. Another chapter is on the discovery of the Dawn Redwood, a "living fossil" from the Cretaceous, whose only connection to the idea of "urban forests" seems to be that the discoverers were paid by Harvard University, which is in Boston, which is a city. There are also chapters on the (surprisingly contentious!) history of Arbor Day, Thomas Jefferson's tree collection, and the founding of America's various great arboretums (tree museums) including the New York Botanical Garden, the Arnold Arboretum, and the Morton Arboretum. All of which doesn't leave a lot of room for my poor street trees. "Historical Tree Diseases of the US" would have been a much more accurate title, but I suppose someone along the way decided that wouldn't sell as well.

I feel a bit churlish complaining so much though, because in the end the book is a fun read. Despite my proposed serious-sounding title, Jonnes is very much writing in the vibe of Mary Roach or Bill Bryson: she tells interesting stories in a familiar, entertaining way, and if they're a bit random and hang together more by virtue of their "cool to know" quality than their deep thematic connection, that's okay. The main point is to have fun. For instance, a chapter on how DC got its cherry trees is quite disconnected from the rest of the book, but is nonetheless a great story. I was most interested in the last few chapters, which finally got into the topic of actual urban forests, because that was what had attracted me in the first place, but they all were surprisingly engaging. I also have to be very grateful to Jonnes for introducing me to the NYC Street Tree Map, which actually allows you to zoom down onto any block in the city, click on a tree, and find out facts about what species it is, how big it is, how many pounds of air pollution it removes each year, and so on. I've had a lot of fun identifying the trees outside of my apartment.

I read this as an ARC via NetGalley.
