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AN INTERVIEW WITH CHUCK WEBER  
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by  
ALLISON MCLEROY  
WITH MARNIE & LORI GALLOWAY  

Recently, we talked with Mr. Chuck Weber. He is Supervisor of the Urban Forestry, Horticulture, and Landscape Support for the City of Huntsville. Some of his duties include fixing up your yard after the public works department has fixed a sewer or put in a gutter. His department also takes care of trees along the streets and in the parks. He will go out and look at trees that have problems. He takes care of about 240 square miles and about 40- to 80,000 trees. He helped save the dogwood that is about 100-150 years old. It was on Old Madison Pike. The tree is now in the Botanical Gardens. The following includes excerpts from this interview.

Allison:  
What laws have you passed to help save trees?

C. Weber:  
What laws have been passed? OK. The city has a tree ordinance that was passed in 1981 and it did some things, [but] it really didn’t do much to save trees. We don’t have a tree protection ordinance. Now the tree ordinance was revised in 1985, and it’s a little better. But there’s still nothing that says that I can’t cut all of the trees down. Let’s say that I’ve
got a piece of land with trees on it and I’m going to build a house there, I can cut them all down if I want to. If I’m not smart enough to see some value in those trees, then there’s nothing to stop me from cutting those down. Now. If we were to change that to where we had a law that says you can’t cut down just any tree, then we’d have to have somebody to enforce that . . . And, any kind of enforcement needs to be done by an intelligent, informed person.

A:  
How did you get the laws passed?

CW:  
The City Council for Huntsville is like the Legislature or Congress, and it would have the city’s legal department take a look at it [a proposed ordinance] and it might make some changes and so forth, and then it would vote on it. It would either vote it up or vote it down. The tree ordinance passed 5 to nothing in favor. We did a good job on it. Or did we? You know, maybe it would have been better if it had been a little bit tougher and the vote was 3 to 2 or 4 to 1. We had a whole lot of support for something that might not have been as strong as it needed to be. I mean, that’s one way to look at it.

A:  
Are the laws working as you hoped?

CW:  
Yes and no. As far as the parking lot landscape ordinance is concerned, all you have to do is drive along the Parkway and you can see that one is not working the way we want it. The intention was that we wanted to have certain standards that people would have to live up to. But we still wanted to have it loose enough so that they could take a designer and come up with something really creative. They wouldn’t have to use a cookie cutter and have every parking lot look like every other parking lot. And that has worked in some cases, but it hasn’t worked in some.
A:  
Are there particular trees you try to save or encourage people to plant? Why?

CW:  
You asked two questions. One has to do with what kind of trees we recommend people to plant? OK. The other what kind do you keep? To some extent, that’s the same question. In some ways it’s two different questions. As far as what to plant, you want to plant species that will grow and become good strong trees. People usually say, “What’s a good fast-growing tree?” Usually if you plant a tree that’s known to grow very, very fast, you’re going to have a weak tree that’s going to blow apart or fall apart when the weather’s bad. So the secret is to plant a tree that’s going to be strong, but do a real good job of planting it so that it will grow as fast as it can grow.

If you’ve got a big area, and you want a lot of shade, then instead of planting a silver maple, and they’ll grow fast but they fall apart, you plant something like one of the oaks. We have a lot of oak trees around here, and they’re good trees. Sugar maples, green ash, there are a whole bunch of trees like that, that are basically good trees. If you do a good job of planting them, they will grow fast. If you don’t do a good job of planting them, then nothing’s going to work out very well.

Now, as far as the strength of a tree is concerned, what we’re looking for in a tree is: I look at it kind of from a mechanical engineer standpoint. I want one that has real strong branches, and let me get a couple of wood samples over here and I’ll show you something.

[Returning with a piece of cedar trunk and a Bradford pear branch.] This is the difference between a fork and a real branch. You can see [pointing to the cedar] that a true branch is tied in all the way with the center of the tree. I would trust my life on a branch like this any day.
Now, this right here is a fork [pointing to the Bradford]. As you know, the leaves are up there trying to collect sunlight and competing with each other. So that means that this fork is going to tend to grow this way, and this one’s going to tend to grow that way. So you’ve got more and more pull right on that fork. The growth is taking place there, and as these guys get fatter they’re going to squash each other here and here, and this part down between the fork is probably already dead.

This is a perfect place for fungus to grow, and so you’re going to get decay here. So as the two parts up here get heavier and heavier, they’re going to pull more and more on a joint that’s getting weaker and weaker.

Lori:
And one of these storms comes through . . .

CW:
Exactly. And everybody says, “Why don’t you plant these Bradford pears?” Well, that’s exactly why. They do this an awful lot and then they fall apart.

That’s the kind of thing I wish more people understood. Because the fast growing trees will tend to have a lot of forks in them. So I like a tree that’s got a strong central leader, then real wide branch angles, and true branches, like the cedar tree you just saw there.

A:
Have you got community support for your work?

CW:
Yes.
A:  
Do people like the laws?

CW:  
It's not a question of laws, it's more a question of programs. I don't enforce any laws. My job is to help the city have better trees and shrubs and things like that. And to some extent, if you've got a problem with a tree, part of my job is to help you understand the problem and find out who to get to help you with it.

L:  
So the public can just call out here and ask questions about their trees?

CW:  
I wouldn't say that, but they do anyway. You know, I try to give people either a good answer to their question or the name of somebody that can go and look at the problems.

A:  
What projects are you most proud of, and why?

CW:  
The things that I'm most proud of you can't see. One of them is this group of guys that work here. Before, oh, say, 10 years ago, there was a lot of work done and so forth, but there really wasn't much attention paid to training, learning how horticulture and forestry really work, and the guys that are here now have really started doing a good job of learning that.

As far as specific projects are concerned, there's one that I really like. We got a grant to do some tree planting, and we did it over in, do you know where Northwood subdivision is? It's a low income housing project that's west of Pulaski Pike, and north of University Drive. It's where the Calvary Hill magnet school is. We went through that area, and some of the people who did a lot of the planting were kids who lived in
the area that needed jobs. We planted about 350 trees, which is the first time that anything much had been planted in there.

*L:*

*And that gave those kids a stake in their community.*

*CW:*

Yeah, I think so. We went through there not too long ago, and you know, some of them had been broken or whatever, but [on the whole] it really worked out well. The people that did the planting did a good job of it, and I’m real happy with the outcome.

*A:*

*Last question: Is it better to keep trees where they are, or to move them?*

*CW:*

[Laughing ] Which tree are you speaking of?

*A:*

*The dogwood. [Referring to the 100-year old dogwood that was moved from Madison Pike to the Botanical Garden. Huntsville school children helped raise money to save the dogwood.]*

*CW:*

That particular tree should have been recognized as an unusual tree five years ago. That is an uncommonly large and uncommonly old dogwood. It has been on a good site and apparently they took good care of it. If we had done our homework right, or let’s say if the State Highway Department had done its homework, or whoever it was, it would have been better to plan with the tree specifically in mind. It could have been a feature instead of a problem. But it dropped through the cracks, so at this point what we have to do is learn from it. And I think we’re doing that. You probably wouldn’t
be sitting here right now, listening and learning about trees if it wasn’t for that dogwood. So in that sense, it has been a really good thing.

Let me say one other thing, and that is that we’ve got some real good people that are going to move it. It’s going to get good care when it gets out to the Botanical Garden. If I were a tree, I’d want to live at the Botanical Garden. We have good chances.