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Midwest Urban Tree Care Forum

April 4-6 2003

By Derek Mercer, ISU
Arboriculture Club

The 1st annual Midwest Urban Tree Care Forum was held in Chicago, IL and surrounding suburbs in early April of 2003. This forum was an opportunity for students, teachers, practicing arborists, and urban foresters from all over the Midwest to come together and discuss the state of urban tree care. Despite unseasonably cold weather and lots of rain, we traveled to over 14 different sites and listened to over 20 different speakers all around Chicagoland during this three-day period. ISU attendees included Rex Johnson, Derek Mercer, Andrea Frost, and Dr. Jan Thompson. The forum presented countless networking opportunities, and it would not have been hard for one to leave the forum with several prospects for future employment. Every speaker and site presented unique circumstances for the care of urban trees, but over the three days there were a few major topics that almost every speaker mentioned.

The most prominent of all themes was the well-developed people skills an arborist or urban forester must possess. We must act as diplomats and have the ability to communicate effectively. We must also have an understanding of the wide array of people that live in cities. Arborists and urban foresters must communicate and understand every type of person out there. This list of people includes mayors, children, home and business owners, neighborhood leaders, wealthy people, poor people, educated, and uneducated people. We must also understand the intentions of others in closely related fields, such as horticulture or landscape architecture. In some cases it is even necessary to be able to communicate and understand those who speak different languages or come from different cultures or countries. No one group or person can ever be ignored.

A second, more technical theme was proper tree planting. This theme can be summed up in three words: ROOT FLARES EXPOSED. When a tree is planted, the root flares should be planted above ground. The stem at ground level needs to be wider than the rest of the main stem. This provides



the best structural support and allows roots to grow and develop at a proper soil depth. The hackberry in the picture at left is a good example of a

tree that was planted too deeply. A planted tree should not look like a telephone pole that goes straight into the ground. If trees are properly planted at a young age, countless urban tree problems such as girdling roots, weak structure, and susceptibility to disease will be avoided.

The final theme mentioned by many speakers was urban soils. Urban soils are often mixed and are very different from those found in natural settings. Soil tests are necessary to analyze the medium in which trees will be grown, and then to select the best tree for those conditions. If the right tree is planted in the right place, many urban tree problems can be avoided. If proper consideration regarding species selection is based on the site conditions, and the tree is properly planted, chances are, a healthy, beautiful, and long-lived tree will result from this thoughtful approach.

Aside from the various networking opportunities, major themes, and other tree talk, the forum was a chance to experience the sights, sounds, food, music, and culture such a major city as Chicago has to offer. The four from Iowa State who attended this event enjoyed the exchange of ideas relating to trees and the rest of the world. Every one of us brought back a new and unique perspective, but we all learned and had a memorable weekend.



An American elm in an elm preservation program. It is a favorite of the Director of the Art Institute of Chicago