

## **Growing and Preserving the Los Angeles Urban Forest**

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Why is this important? In his role as guardian of our forests -- “only you can prevent forest fires” is the slogan he made famous -- he reminds us that we are a nation that has big forests, and that includes “urban forests” like we have in LA.

Ours is a growing urban forest, that was just kicked into higher gear by the appointment by Mayor Garcetti of Rachel Malarich to be the [City Forest Officer](#), a first-of-its-kind position. Her charge is to oversee the continuing growth of the country's largest urban forest and unite all urban nature organizations under one person to pass environmental initiatives from LA's Green New Deal, according to the Mayor's office.

It sounds like a lot, and it's very ambitious to be attaching a six-figure salaried position to an amorphous program like the Green New Deal. However, trees are critical to our survival as the reality of climate change, a component of eventual global warming, wakes us from our sun-drenched stupor, reminding us that time is quickly running out for life as we love it in Los Angeles.

The urban forest description for LA is hard to imagine, but we have over one million trees in the city. Most of them are located in the City's 15,000 acres of parkland, according to the Department of Recreation and Parks (not to be confused with the County's Department of Parks and Recreation, which has its own Forestry Division).

The Mayor and our new Forest Officer have a goal of increasing the number of City trees by planting 90,000 trees by 2021. Why stop there? Trees improve our air quality by absorbing harmful greenhouse gasses like carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and ground level ozone and, through photosynthesis, converting those harmful GHGs into oxygen that helps to purify the air.

In our Mediterranean climate -- where with rare exception -- the sun shines every single day of the year, finding cooling shade is one of our urban streetscape challenges. We need more shade trees along our streets to help create walkable communities. As more people are discovering a form of “new urbanism” that allows them to live, work, shop and play in their local community, there will be more foot traffic along neighborhood streets – which is another reason why those streets must provide a canopy of shade.

Trees help clean the air; they provide a social setting by creating shade in places from the smallest backyard to the largest park (in our case, Griffith Park), and are generally acknowledged to be a smart investment.

Looking at the flip side of the Mayor’s good news appointment is the question: Why did what seems so obvious take so long to do?

Succinctly, says the Los Angeles Times, “Trees have often been treated as merely [aesthetic enhancements](#). Nice, but not essential.” The Times points out another familiar reason this happens within many government entities and programs: a lack of direct ownership and accountability. As The Times states, “There are “multiple reasons why trees get short shrift. Jurisdiction over the city’s urban forest crosses multiple agencies — from the Recreation and Parks Department to the Bureau of Street Services to the Department of Water and Power (which trims trees next to power lines). There hasn’t been a singular focus on tree care.”

Hopefully, Forest Officer Malarich will be able to bring these different constituencies together under her direction and provide a coherent strategy and implementation to grow our urban forest.

This “growing” of our urban forest is just as important as “maintaining” the urban forest we already have, a point stressed by City Controller Ron Galperin whose [Urban Forest Preservation Report](#) states, “Preserving our trees is essential to preserving the quality of life in our neighborhoods, but our urban forest is at risk.” According to Galperin, some of the problem occurs because the “Bureau of Street Services’ Urban Forestry Division is responsible for maintaining street trees, but it does so without an accurate inventory and still uses outdated paper logs to track its trimming and maintenance work.”

Right away, you see the bifurcation of “tree policy” in Los Angeles. The Department of Public Works will be planting the trees, and the Bureau of Street Services will be maintaining current growth.

It sounds like it could become a Sisyphean challenge -- rolling the rock uphill only to have it roll back down and crush hopes -- when Galperin says, “The U.S. Forest Service and city arborists say that disease and pests could kill 30 percent of the region's trees within a decade without proper care and maintenance.”

So, we need to plant new trees to expand the urban forest, while maintaining our existing urban forest by mitigating the damage from diseases and pests. It’s a tall order for Forest Officer Malarich, who could succeed and become an iconic figure in her own right, just like Smokey the Bear.

Source: <https://www.citywatchla.com/index.php/2016-01-01-13-17-00/los-angeles/18283-growing-and-preserving-the-los-angeles-urban-forest>