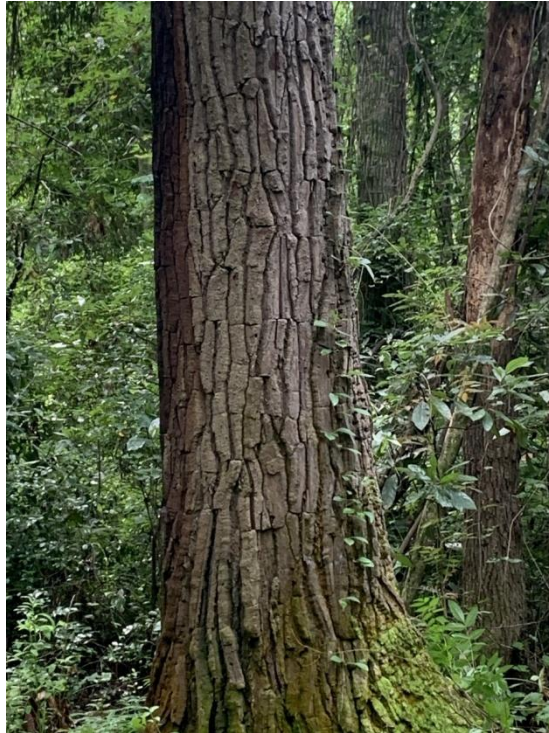


the Sumter ITEM

Trees are crowned champions, too: 2 friends, colleagues discover potential largest of its species in state in Sumter

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Some kids grew up wanting to be storm chasers, but two college friends and experts in garden cultivation and management grew up wanting to chase down giant trees.

Champion Trees are the largest of their species according to a standard measuring formula based on trunk circumference, tree height and average crown spread, and the two friends recently discovered a potential candidate planted right in Sumter.

Phillip Carnley, a horticulturist for Swan Lake-Iris Gardens, came upon a rare, giant Loblolly Bay (*Gordonia lasinathus*) tree that is expected to be the state's new champion or co-champion of the *Gordonia* species.

"It was kind of a happy accident," Carnley said. "It was just kind of awe inspiring to see one as massive as this one was."

Carnley found the tree in a swampy area off Gordonia Drive, which he thought was ironic given the name, on July 22. He said this one was massive in comparison to what he has seen of this species.

Just a week after discovering the giant, Carnley took his friend, Chase Smoak, a horticulturist serving the Clemson University Extension Office covering Sumter, Clarendon and Lee counties, to measure the tree.

An American native, the Loblolly Bay reaches an average height of 35-60 feet, according to a plant profile from the University of Florida.

According to the South Carolina Champion Tree database, the current Loblolly Bay state Champion Tree is based in Aiken County, measured with a circumference of 68.4 inches, a height of 82 feet and a crown spread of 38 feet.

Carnley and Smoak measured the Gordonia in Sumter with a circumference of 88 inches, a height of 81 feet and a crown spread of 33.5 feet. The two immediately realized they found a Gordonia that reached Champion Tree status and nominated it immediately.

Sumter's tree could be considered a co-champion because it is within a 5-point difference of its competitor, according to Smoak, but regardless of its rank, he and Carnley are just glad to have found such an amazing giant.

Smoak said if horticulturists love one thing, it's finding large trees, and to be able to find a potential state or national Champion Tree is even better.

"For somebody to be able to find a Champion Tree in their lifetime alone, that's an accomplishment," Smoak said.

The two friends have known each other since attending Clemson, and they've been pushing each other in their fields since for the horticulture and the fun behind the job, Carnley said. This is one of the aspects that makes horticulture fun for them.

Smoak said the Gordonia isn't the first potential Champion Tree in Sumter, though. Not too long ago, someone discovered a Magnolia tree that even made the national rank.

"We had a champion Magnolia here in Sumter that we lost last year," Smoak said. "In fact, it was the second-largest Magnolia in the nation, but it got struck by lightning."

Smoak and Carnley agreed that preserving and protecting large trees is extremely important.

"It's important, to me, to protect these trees for prosperity. As the population grows, we see fewer and fewer large native species due to habitat loss and encroachment," Carnley said. "The value of a tree is relative. Each tree has its own benefits, whether it be economical or social or ecological."

Smoak said there are many ways a community can protect big trees like the Gordonia they found. It just takes a bit of caring.

"It's kind of the same thing with yourself. You always make sure that your heart is in good health," Smoak said. "The same thing goes for trees."

Smoak said landowners wishing to protect large trees may benefit from installing lightning protection on the tree, correcting soil compaction around the root zone with the use of an air spade and proper pruning of dead and/or structurally compromising limbs, which often requires a professional for larger trees.

A key point with any tree is that you want to keep it as stress-free as possible, Smoak said. Once a tree becomes stressed by factors like bad pruning or compacted root systems, it opens itself up for secondary problems like pest insects or plant diseases.

He said if any landowner wants to help preserve and protect large trees like the Gordonia in Sumter, Clemson Extension agents are a free resource to the public.

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