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THE ROLE OF TREE CLINICS IN URBAN FORESTRY

J. A. Witter and H. L. Morton¹

ABSTRACT

A tree clinic analyzes tree problems and recommends appropriate actions to the public. The objective of tree clinics is to inform the citizen about urban trees. This paper is based on the experiences of 30 tree clinics held in Ann Arbor during the last eight years. The ingredients necessary for a successful tree clinic are discussed: (1) active sponsor, (2) suitable date and time, (3) good location, (4) proper publicity, (5) diversified experts, (6) proper organization, (7) sizable public turnout, and (8) follow-up publicity and acknowledgments.

It is becoming increasingly important to inform and educate the public about the proper care of urban trees. Methods commonly used by the city forester include newspaper articles, extension bulletins, books, radio and TV spots, talk shows, meetings, films, and individual contact with the public (Andreson and Jorgensen 1975, Tate 1976, Sandfort and Cone 1977, Wray 1977). Handouts given to individuals or left in their mailboxes by city personnel explaining a particular operation such as tree planting or trimming is another commonly used education method. Some cities are now conducting or experimenting with various types of tree clinics as another method of educating the public about proper urban tree care. The objective of this paper is to describe the ingredients needed for a successful tree clinic program. This paper is based on 30 tree clinics held in Ann Arbor during the last eight years.

A tree clinic is a meeting or program devoted to the analysis of and recommended treatment for tree problems encountered by the public. Most are advertised as "sick-tree clinics" since citizens are urged to bring examples of tree problems (primarily insect and disease damage) to the clinic for diagnosis and recommended treatment. Indoor and outdoor tree clinics are held in Ann Arbor. Clinics inform the citizen about urban tree care through (1) diagnosing tree problems, (2) providing handouts on common tree problems, (3) answering questions about general tree care, (4) referrals to local and state agencies that assist citizens with tree care problems, and (5) presenting slides of urban tree problems. Techniques 1-4 and 2-5 were used in outdoor and indoor tree clinics, respectively.

The ingredients necessary for a successful tree clinic are (1) active sponsor, (2) suitable date and time, (3) good location, (4) proper publicity, (5) diversified experts, (6) proper organization during the actual clinic, (7) sizable public turnout, and (8) publicity and acknowledgments following the clinic.

Sponsor. The tree clinics are jointly sponsored by the Ann Arbor Forestry Division and the School of Natural Resources of The University of Michigan. The Ann Arbor city forester organized the clinics and his staff provided technical assistance. The School of Natural Resources generally supplied one to two resource specialists (i.e., entomologists, pathologists, urban foresters, landscape architects) for each clinic. A city forester is the most likely person to sponsor such a clinic, but any qualified individual, group, or agency could do so. Resource specialists from universities, state departments of agriculture or natural resources, county or state extension service, or the United States Department of Agriculture may be willing to provide expertise.

Date and Time. We often conduct one indoor tree clinic in April and normally hold one outdoor tree clinic per month during May, June, and July. Clinics held prior to May or after

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July do not capture public interest. The indoor clinics have been scheduled on weekday evenings from 7:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m., while the outdoor clinics have been held from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. on Saturdays. The best time for these clinics will vary depending on the local situation.

Location. An ideal location for an indoor clinic is a meeting room in the city library, city hall, city school, or nature center, where topics of general interest can be discussed and slides shown. The location of outdoor clinics can be anywhere with suitable facilities. In Ann Arbor, all outdoor clinics are conducted in city parks with shelters. This provides a central location shelter from the elements, and a place for demonstrations. Each of the three outdoor clinics given in a single year is conducted in a different park so as to place the locale close to many citizens and thereby encourage good attendance. We have generally operated our clinics as separate activities. However, tree clinics could be held in conjunction with other major activities, such as a sesquicentennial celebration.

Publicity. Proper publicity is essential for a tree clinic to be a success. Tate (1976) discussed the most effective ways of disseminating information on urban forestry to the citizen. Newspapers, radio and TV announcements, and telephone contacts are used to inform the public about tree clinics. We have relied on timely placed news stories and features on some aspect of the clinic as our primary publicity source. Our standard format is a short article or announcement in the newspaper on the Monday before our Saturday tree clinic. This is followed by a larger article or photograph related to the clinic which appears in the newspaper on Thursday or Friday. We recommend a follow-up announcement in the newspaper several days before the tree clinic. Additionally, radio spots and video tapes can be prepared and supplied to your local stations.

Professional help. It is essential to have qualified resource professionals participate in the tree clinics. Most samples from "sick trees" (e.g., foliage and branch damage) brought to the clinics involved insect and disease problems. Therefore, specialists in these two areas are critical to the clinics' success. A minimum of four resource specialists is necessary for the outdoor clinics. One entomologist, one pathologist, the city forester, and the assistant city forester or another expert on arboriculture has been an effective team for us. The city forester can often respond to specific problems homeowners have for the city tree in front of their property. This short-circuits other inquiries to the city and has favorable face-to-face public relations impact. Tree clinics also introduce graduate students or college seniors to practical problems in urban forestry. We strongly recommend involving one or two students at the tree clinics.

Organization and format. We conduct one indoor clinic each year during April or early May, which serves as a kick-off. It is advertised as an educational and preventive maintenance clinic. The indoor clinic is tightly structured and resembles a seminar or workshop. The program generally consists of five 15-minute presentations followed by 10–20 minutes of questions after each speaker. The following topics are covered: (1) introduction and services available within the city and country; (2) tree care including planting, watering, fertilizing, trimming, etc.; (3) tree species recommended for planting, including types of questions to ask when determining what tree(s) to plant; and (4) common insect and disease problems and their control. Displays of common insects and diseases are sometimes prepared and available for study by the citizens before and after the indoor clinic. Handouts on a few of the major tree problems discussed during the clinic also are recommended.

For outdoor clinics, signs indicating the exact location within the city park must be visible and in place beforehand. Picnic tables serve as good working areas. Trash receptacles are needed to discard the "sick-tree specimens," although many citizens enjoy seeing samples of the day's "real-world" problems.

The city forester normally greets the citizens and talks informally about the services provided by the forestry department; then introduces the citizens to the resource specialist. The specialist identifies the problem on the "sick tree" and recommends a course of action. Examples of recommendations are to do nothing; prune, water and fertilize the tree; tree removal; and use an herbicide, insecticide, or fungicide. A short handout on each of the most common insect and disease problems is helpful because the professional does not have to write out instructions for the most common problems (e.g., scale insects and apple scab).

Tree prescription pads are made available at the clinic for the use of the resource specialist. The specialist writes down the name of the insect or disease problem along with additional information such as why chemical control is not necessary or the name and exact time to use a specific pesticide. Many of the tree problems brought to the clinic do not require chemical control. For example, silver maple leaves damaged by the maple bladder gall mite is one of the most common problems. Most citizens welcome our advice to "do nothing" once we explain the cause of these "little bumps" and that they do not cause significant damage.

Public turnout. Attendance averages about 25 persons for the indoor clinic in April and approximately 150 persons (ranging from 35-250) for each outdoor clinic.

Follow-up advertisements and acknowledgments. It is essential to follow-up the indoor clinic and the first outdoor clinic with a story in the newspaper. A newspaper picture showing the clinic in operation, with a resource specialist identifying a common tree problem, is the type of publicity that gives continuity to the program and reminds citizens that another "sick-tree clinic" will be held in four weeks.

Acknowledgment of the role of the resource specialists in making the tree clinics a success is appropriate at the end of each summer's program. A letter to their supervisor and a resolution by the city council showing appreciation for their work are examples of proper acknowledgment of the resource specialists.

SUMMARY

There are many ways of communicating with the public about proper urban tree care, but providing good information at the proper time with effective publicity is not an easy task. The City of Ann Arbor has had outstanding success with its tree clinics. We recommend that pest management specialists and city foresters consider the tree clinic as an additional method of providing urban tree care information to its citizens.

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