

# GREENING NEW YORK

OP-ED

BY MELISSA ELSTEIN

New York City recently planted its millionth new tree after a roughly decade-long environmental initiative started under Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration and continued by Mayor Bill de Blasio's. Of these, more than 625,000 are street trees.

Many New Yorkers assume that since the city has planted these new sidewalk trees that the city is also taking care of them by watering them, taking care of the soil, adding guards and the like. People are surprised to learn that this is not the case; there is simply not enough money in the budget to pay for that type of care. That is why tree-loving New Yorkers are needed to care for these trees, especially those most recently planted.

Most urbanites recognize the obvious benefits of street trees: they clean and cool the

air, as well as provide oxygen thus lowering asthma rates; provide shade, thereby reducing the summer heat-island effect; provide shelter and food sources for birds; create visual beauty, therefore reducing stress levels; and increasing property values and commercial business foot traffic. There also is evidence to suggest that trees reduce crime!

Another reason for New Yorkers to care for street trees pertains to the importance of tree beds (the soil in which the tree is planted). Sidewalk tree beds are generally the only non-concrete paved surfaces that exist in our urban street design. Understanding why tree bed soil is important to us and the implications to our surrounding waterways requires an understanding of city sewer systems. Much of the sewer system is a combined sewer/storm water system. This older urban infrastructure unfortunately results in waste overflows into waterways during storms — even just 1 inch of rainwater re-

sults in gallons of storm water runoff per city block.

During storms, the combined sewer system gets overburdened and sewage waste gets discharged into our rivers (leading to combined sewage overflow — “CSO”) without said waste being treated. Thus, human pathogens and curbside waste (for example, dog poop, plastics, etc.) flush down the storm drains and pollute our rivers and waterways.

How does this CSO issue relate to street tree bed conditions? Well, green infrastructure theoretically exists in our current network of sidewalk trees. With properly cultivated (permeable) soil, those tree beds would help absorb and slow storm water runoff. (Tree health also improves with cultivated soil, as trees are better able to absorb nutrients and water). Unfortunately, city tree bed soil is often compacted into cement-like conditions.

All these street tree benefits are why we need heightened awareness regarding the ne-

cessity of volunteer street tree care and “adoption” throughout city. Towards that end, my neighborhood group held its second annual “Love Your Street Tree Day” tree bed care and cleanup event on May 22. With the generosity of our co-sponsors, we distributed tree care tool bags to all participants, as well as mulch, compost, flowers, bulbs and “pick up the poop” dog care signs. Volunteers canvassed the West Side, either attending to their own adopted trees, or to neglected trees in need, to improve tree beds. Each “Love Your Street Tree” event has grown in size and outreach, and we hope that these urban tree care events will continue to grow as New Yorkers learn the multiple benefits of our street trees.

If you are interested in taking care of a street tree, it is important to have the proper knowledge, as sometimes good intentions but improper actions can actually damage or kill a tree. For example, anything that “girdles” trees (for example, wrapping tree trunks with “curb your dog” sign or lights) harms them as trees grow by expanding externally, and anything that interferes with that process is detrimental. Another example is planting the wrong types of plants in tree beds — for example, corn stalks (yes, we have seen this) — that compete with trees for water. Tree guards, which are recommended as they protect soil from getting compacted, must be compliant with city regulations as many non-compliant guards can also harm trees. This includes installing guards with open bottoms, which allow storm water to freely enter the tree bed.

I highly recommend taking tree stewardship trainings with Trees New York or the Department of Parks & Recreation. It is enjoyable and educational, and after taking those trainings I had a deeper appreciation for our street trees and all that they endure, all the while giving us humans so many benefits!

Melissa Elstein is the co-founder of the West 80s Neighborhood Association, [www.west80s.org](http://www.west80s.org)

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## Neighborhood Scrapbook



Photo: West 80's Neighborhood Association

### UWS TREES GET TLC

Upper West Siders participated in the second annual “Love Your Street Tree Day” on Sunday, sprucing up and restoring tree beds throughout the neighborhood. The event, hosted by the West 80s Neighborhood Association together with local elected officials, city agencies, nonprofits, and local businesses, attracted dozens of residents, who put down mulch and compost, and also took part in a tree audit and sidewalk cleanup.

“We are thrilled and grateful to see our Upper West Side volunteer cleanup and tree bed beautification event, Love Your Street Tree Day, expand in scope and supporters this second year,” said Melissa Elstein, the neighborhood association's co-founder and co-creator of the event.

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