

When a tree dies, don't waste your breath: Rescue the wood to honor its memory

November 12 2019, by Cris Brack, Ashley Jameson Eriksmoen and Rod Lamberts



Turning a street tree into timber is much more respectful and useful than mulching it all. Author provided

Trees die. You don't have to like it, but they do. And this comes as a surprise to some. A senior public servant once told one of us (Brack): "Trees don't die; people kill them."

Of course sometimes we kill [trees](#), especially in [urban areas](#) where trees

are regularly removed for reasons of safety or urban development.

But more concerning than the death of a tree is how we waste them afterwards. In municipalities around the world, the trees are chipped into mulch. Not just the leaves and skinny branches and bark, but the whole tree.

It's the least valuable, indeed least respectful, thing you can do with a tree.

In contrast, the wood can be rescued and used to craft furniture and other unique objects that honour the trees and their legacy of [timber](#).

For those more poetically inclined, trees are literally made of our breath. By chipping them, we are wasting the breath of our past and making it harder to breathe in the future.

Chipping trees means releasing carbon to the atmosphere as the mulch breaks down. It's also a waste of high-quality timbers such as oak, ash, elm and cedar, which, ironically, Australia [imports by the shipload](#).

When made into furniture, for example, the tree is transformed, the carbon stays bound and we have something both functional and beautiful.



Turning a whole tree into woodchips for mulch is the least valuable and least respectful thing you can do to it. Author provided

Urban forests can keep on giving

Salvaging quality timber is such an obvious win-win, you'd think everyone would do it. Sadly, there are many obstacles, including the difficulties of coordinating multiple public and private stakeholders and agencies.

To better understand the challenges and opportunities for urban timber rescue in Australia, we hosted a [symposium](#) at Australian National University in September 2019. Forestry researchers, [public officials](#), craftspeople, teachers, students, conservation activists and city parks employees attended. They [identified key values and concerns](#) critical to reclaiming and distributing urban timber.

The symposium included a demonstration of how a portable ([Lucas](#)) mill could be quickly set up near a tree to cut it into useful timber. Operators can minimise waste by using bespoke cutting patterns to get the most valuable timber from each tree.

Participants from California described the Sacramento Tree Foundation's [Urban Wood Rescue](#) program. Arborists, residents and the city work together to intercept logs from the waste stream. The timber is then made available to the public.



Katalin Sallai's Witness Tree Bench of Kingston (2016), 600 x 450 x 2000mm, *Cedrus deodara* (Himalayan cedar) from Kingston, mild steel. Credit: Martin Ollman, Author provided

This program benefits from public trust that stems from decades of active tree planting across the city and genuine concern for the health of the urban forest. Recognising that the recovered wood is too good to waste is a natural extension of residents' respect for their living trees.

Craftspeople and teachers from Canberra and other Australian cities discussed how providing quality timber to school students supports their love of making and develops their skills. One participant spoke of high school students being thrilled to work with such beautiful timber. They normally make do with cheap construction pine or broken-down pallets.

Rescuing and transforming the timber can bring people together to teach, learn and create. The object then captures not just carbon but a sense of the history of the tree and the place where it lived.

This is what the [Witness Tree Project](#) in Canberra, spearheaded by Eriksmoen, set out to do. Wood was rescued from just six of hundreds of trees scheduled for removal. The timber was distributed to [six local woodworking artisans and furniture makers](#).

Their task was to creatively reconstruct a narrative of each tree and its neighbourhood. They transformed the trees into unique objects that delivered anecdotes and collective memories of local history and culture, culminating in a [public exhibition](#).



Street trees can provide valuable hardwood timber that, unlike woodchips, doesn't release their stored carbon. Author provided

Katalin Sallai created the Witness Tree Bench of Kingston from a Himalayan cedar. The circular planter, containing a sapling of the same species, is the diameter of this tree when it was felled in 2013. The unfurling spiral arc of the bench seat describes the potential diameter of Himalayan cedar in ideal natural conditions.

Many references to Kingston, one of Canberra's oldest suburbs, are embedded and engraved in the surface, including coins commemorating the queen's 1954 visit. The bench is both an educational tool, describing the differences between a city tree and a rural tree, and a celebration of its own tree's life and provenance as a witness to local history.

The recent symposium was also told of the positive effects of having living trees in our surroundings, including improved mental health, reductions in crime and better air quality. But this isn't lost when the trees die. [Recent research](#) has shown wooden furniture and fittings in offices or homes can benefit mental health and reduce stress and sick days.

Seeing urban trees given a second life can also help ease eco-anxiety. Every tree removal can add to the sense of helplessness, but putting those trees to good use may create feelings of empowerment.



Wood from a street tree is sawn and dried before the timber is given new life as a piece of fine furniture or other useful object. Author provided

Four steps you can take

So don't despair or whine when a tree is removed. Instead, make sure the wood isn't squandered. Otherwise you are wasting your breath—twice!

Here's what you can do:

- **raise awareness:** tell people trees *do* die naturally, and city trees have shorter lives than their rural kin
- **demand action:** tell your local representative that community trees are squandered on woodchips
- **buy local:** buy products made from locally salvaged wood, not imported timber
- **get radical:** if you're the protesting type, chain yourself to a log to stop it being chipped.

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