

'Scottie Ash Seed' protects trees in public parks, inoculating them against the much-feared emerald ash borer

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

It's an unlikely place for a nature hike: Tucked away on the Northwest Side of Chicago, the Montclare neighborhood is marked by quiet streets,

neat bungalows and postage-stamp lawns.

But Scott Carlini's pale blue eyes are alight as he peers over fences and rooftops. There, more than a block away, he spots them, towering six stories above the ground, their gnarled branches black against a gray sky.

"Those are the [ash trees](#) I'm going to be taking you to," he says.

Since 2006, Carlini, 58, of Elmwood Park, has been on a one-man mission to save the Chicago area's historic ash [trees](#) from the ravages of the emerald ash borer, a torpedo-shaped metallic-green beetle that has killed more than 6 million trees in the Chicago region since 2010. In his spare time, and at his own expense, he protects 50 trees in the Chicago area and Wisconsin, inoculating them with a highly effective insecticide.

Carlini said he is fulfilling a promise he made to himself as a tree-loving kid growing up in Chicago and Elmwood Park. Even as an 8-year-old, he questioned whether damaged trees really had to be cut down, and when Dutch elm disease started taking its toll, his resolve intensified.

"I said, if something like Dutch elm happens again, when my generation is in charge, I will be in the forefront, helping tree owners save their trees," he recalled.

At Openlands, a Chicago conservation nonprofit where Carlini was trained as a volunteer tree keeper, Vice President of Community Conservation Daniella Pereira said he is a "dedicated, passionate advocate for trees."

"It's what he loves, probably one of the top things in the world that he does love, so I would say it's not a chore for him so much as he wants to show others how to do things correctly, and he also doesn't want to see ash trees just lost in our region," she said.

Carlini, who works as an arborist, arrived on a recent urban hike with tree clippers and work gloves. His excitement when he got to the intersection of Belden and Nordica avenues was contagious. The ash trees lining the block to the south were all planted before the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, he said. Since fires release carbon and trees absorb it, these ashes likely still contain remnants of the historic disaster.

"They actually lock in peoples' breath," he added of the trees.

"So (I) like to think some historical people had their breath locked up in these old trees."

About a dozen 150-year-old ashes lined the street, each with the species' distinctive deeply furrowed diamond-patterned bark. Many had thick trunks, but one was so slender you could wrap your arms around it.

Ashes grow at different rates, so the only way to really know an ash's age is to cut it down and count the rings, said Carlini, who sometimes goes by the nickname "Scottie Ash Seed." Since some trees on this block had to be cut down by the city, he knows how old they were, and that all the trees on the block were planted at the same time.

Carlini started treating two trees here after the city of Chicago suspended its own inoculation program in 2018. One of those trees shades a neighborhood church, and the other, just around the corner, has an impressive 9-foot circumference.

In 2010, there were an estimated 13 million ash trees in Chicago and the seven surrounding counties, according to Chai-Shian Kua, an urban tree science leader at the Morton Arboretum. By 2020, there were only about 7 million ash trees standing, and only 3 million of those were in decent condition.

Some cities and towns are cutting down the trees to prevent the spread of the emerald ash borer and eliminate the cost of treatment.

Community groups such as Save the Ash are working to save ash trees in Chicago, raising money for privately funded inoculation and pushing the city to resume inoculating some trees.

The cost to inoculate an ash tree is about \$120 for the city of Chicago, and the cost to remove a tree is about \$1,500.

Openlands wants the city to resume inoculation, with Pereira saying new trees won't be able to offer the canopy provided by existing healthy ash trees for another 30 or 40 years.

Opponents of inoculation have argued that it would be less expensive in the long run to replace ash trees with other species.

Carlini's 50 ash trees, selected for their maturity, structural soundness and good health, are on public parkways, and in parks and forest preserves. He injects his trees every three or four years, at a cost of about \$40 to \$150 each, depending on the size of the tree. His total cost is about \$800 a year.

He said he would like to see Chicago inoculate 10% of its ash trees, but he emphasized the positive: With fewer trees, the emerald ash borer is in decline here, there are still some beautiful ash trees left in Chicago, and there's hope that tree experts will develop a disease-resistant ash tree.

When he comes upon one of his inoculated trees after a long absence, it's a great feeling, he said.

"You should be dead and gone," he thinks. "And there you are, 100% healthy."

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