

Homes & Gardens

the hill gardener

The Etiquette of Tree Boxes on Capitol Hill

Sometimes it is hard to know what to do

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY RINDY O'BRIEN

Capitol Hill's streets are lined with linden, elm, oak, maple, sweet gum, and other beautiful trees. Most reside in a tree box, which is the rectangular space between the curb and the sidewalk. Hill residents are fairly good stewards and try to keep the boxes and trees healthy and tidy looking.

Whether Hill residents know it or not, it really is their responsibility, according to DC rules, to keep these tree boxes clean and tidy. The requirement to maintain the tree boxes is just like the law that property owners must clean snow and ice from the sidewalks in front of their homes in the winter. Residents are occasionally sent letters saying that if their tree boxes are not cleaned up they will be served with a fine.

Ironically, the city itself has had a pretty bad reputation with residents when it comes to tree boxes. While the District has gotten a lot better over the years at removing hazardous trees, and replanting them with sturdy new ones, there still are a lot of trees that need pruning or removal. Tree boxes can sit empty for six months or longer due to a serious tree replacement backlog.

The process for removing dead or



Tree boxes can provide some color to the sidewalk area, but it is important to not over-plant the boxes.

dying trees is clouded in mystery, and almost every self-proclaimed street historian can tell you a story of a tree marked with the dreaded "x" being left and a healthy tree mistakenly cut down instead.

So, it is not surprising that many

Hill residents decide not to wait for the city to replace the missing tree in the tree box in front of their houses, or decide to embellish the box with special fencing and plants. But few people realize there are rules and regulations that must be followed, and trying to locate the information is not so easy.

A Tale of Good Intentions

For more than two years, G Street SE between 10th and 11th Streets has been under construction while the DC Water and Sewer Authority (WASA) worked on replacing the water lines. Unfortunately, the job required not just tearing up the streets but also the sidewalks. As a result, a number of the trees were removed, and the tree boxes damaged. WASA promised when the job was finally done that the city department responsible for replacing the trees would come back and finish restoring the street to its previous condition. Neighbors like Joanne Kim on G Street say that WASA did a good job during this period of keeping them informed of each step.

It turns out that the city department responsible for replacing the trees is a small agency under the D.C.



of neglect to the canopy of trees. John P. Thomas, the Urban Forestry Administrative Chief Forester, receives about \$7.5 million a year for the street tree budget. With those funds, he has to plant and maintain the trees that die of natural causes as well as keep up with the construction projects of other city agencies. The same budget has to cover the cost of paying contractors or students to water existing plants during summers of intense heat and drought.

Neighbors Step In

The tree box in front of Joanne Kim's house sat empty for months after the street was finally repaved. The neighbors were puzzled why they never heard anything more from the city. Tired of waiting for the city to come back, she and her neighbors decided to replace the tree, fix the broken tree box, and add a little color back to the neighborhood. Joanne said, "It really was a community effort, where neighbors came out to help with their shovels, some brought topsoil, others helped dig out the old roots and cement left behind. It is what I love about living on Capitol

but in the process damaged all the flower bulbs. And just as amazing, the city failed to plant any trees across the street in an empty tree box.

"I just don't understand," Joanne said, "why there was no communication with us that the city was coming to plant the tree in advance, and when they saw we had taken care of the tree box, why they went ahead and planted their tree." She feels that not only did the city waste money; it also created a lot of bad feelings on the street about the city's respect for citizens and their good work.

Joanne decided to fight back and started making calls without a lot of success. Finally, she asked Councilman Wells to help her obtain a meeting with the UFA and a member of the forestry staff came out to her house. But, the meeting left her discouraged and still without a resolution to her situation. The forestry agency informed her that she had chosen the wrong kind of tree to plant in the box, and that it wasn't a good idea to plant other things in the tree box. Furthermore, she needed a permit to plant the tree in the box, which she had not acquired. And

with that assessment, the meeting was over. Since my interview with Joanne in late March, the sweet gum tree has been removed and iris are beginning to pop up.

Knowing what to do

Unfortunately, there is not an easy way to obtain all the information you might need to care for your tree box in one easy click. The rule of thumb, as best as I can figure out after many phone calls and web searches, is that you need a permit from the city to plant or cut down a tree in your tree box. If you want to put some structure around

the box, it must be 18" tall to prevent tripping. The structure must be three-sided and should allow water to pass under it to increase the amount of rainwater being absorbed. And, if you choose to plant flowers in the box, which is highly discouraged, stay away from annuals that will rob the tree of water, and don't over-plant it.

Here are some suggestions for making sure that you are following the letter of the law in caring for your tree box:



CLOCKWISE from TOP

1. Joanne Kim with her Flowering Cherry tree that she and her neighbors worked hard to restore after city work on the street.
2. At the corner of 7th and East Capitol SE is a tree box that is attractive and meets
3. Some tree boxes have lost their trees and are in a state of neglect.

Transportation Department (DDOT) called the D.C. Urban Forestry Administration (UFA). At one time years ago, the task of planting and keeping the city's public trees plentiful and healthy fell to the Department of Public Works, but by transferring the authority to the Transportation Department the city could use federal highway funds to plant trees.

However, the small Urban Forestry Administration is fighting an uphill battle against decades

Hill. We come together."

Joanne decided to plant a Flowering Cherry tree in the box, and surrounded it with iris, hostas, and a butterfly bush. Everything seemed to be returning back to normal when in February, she came home to find that the city had finally returned and had planted a new tree in the box. The tree is a more mature sweet gum tree. Interestingly, the contractor that planted it left her Flowering Cherry tree next to it in the same box,

- The city suggests that you call 311 (the major service number of DC) and ask for the Urban Forestry Department. Your call should be promptly answered by UFA and you can then determine whether you need a permit to go forward, and other restrictions that may apply. The web link is www.dc.gov/DC/DDOT/Services, and if you click on all services you can find the tree-permitting page that takes you to the Urban Forestry Page.
- Casey Trees has a website full of general information about caring for trees in DC, but their work is focused on private property, and their website will refer you to UFA for specifics. The planning pages have some very helpful tips on considering the size of trees and volume of space, as well as list of trees that do well growing in our area. Once again, it is important to remember that trees that will be growing next to a street may need to be a little hardier than those planted in your yard. www.caseytrees.org
- Trees on the Hill is the Hill's very own organization that works with UFA each year to help supplement the number of trees planted on the Hill. Margaret Missiaen is certainly Capitol Hill's tree expert, especially when it comes to street trees. Trees on the Hill has a website that will put you in touch with Margaret and others, treesforcapitolhill.org.

In the case of tree boxes, it is better to ask first and act later, which is the hard lesson learned over on G Street.

Rindy O'Brien lives on Capitol Hill and is thankful for all the many citizens that care for their tree boxes. Comments or questions can be sent to rindyob@mac.com ★

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