

Christchurch City of Trees, A National Park City

As climate change progresses and extreme weather events become more frequent, we are set to become mindful of the role of trees in our city and across the world.

The 'National Park City', is a wonderful global initiative that challenges communities to make their cities 'greener, healthier and wilder', primarily through establishing more trees. It fits perfectly with Christchurch, our history of tree plantings, and the opportunities ahead for improving and greening our city with further plantings.

When it comes to urban trees, our city's story is quite exceptional. The transformation of the treeless barren the first settlers encountered to today's urban landscapes include areas where tall trees, many planted in the first decades following settlement, have a very striking presence, providing beauty, shelter, shade, character, and places of interest.

A short history of trees across urban Christchurch goes like this.

In the 1850's thousands of early settlers climbed the Bridle Path track from Lyttelton and caught a first glimpse of their home to be, Christchurch and the plains. It was a desolate prospect almost entirely devoid of trees. Only tiny forest remnants were visible at Riccarton and Papanui, and more extensive forest areas were far distant at Woodend and along the foothill ranges.

The Deans secured protection of Riccarton Bush in their 1849 agreement with the Canterbury Association. Very few cities have a fragment of primeval rainforest so close to their centre. Riccarton Bush, now a public reserve vested in the care of our city, is home to Christchurch's oldest trees, which in their youth were contemporaneous with Mōa.

Christchurch settlement's original plans included generous provision for public lands that were to be planted in introduced trees and included Hagley Park (larger than London's Hyde Park), the banks of the Avon and Heathcote rivers, and Cranmer and Latimer Squares.

The settlers quickly began planting a huge variety of trees, most often species they knew from their homelands. At the time, Britain was in the thrall of collecting and distributing trees from all around the world. Our city greatly benefitted from this enthusiasm, and today, we can take pride in having the greatest variety of tree species of any city in the world. Quite an achievement and well worth celebrating, conserving, enriching and extending with further plantings.

Christchurch has many notable specimen trees, wonderful examples of their kind, and many introduced trees thrive better here than in their homelands. Our city has fertile, moist soils, a quasi-continental climate, cold winters, and hot summers. Many trees from Northern climes have particularly well adapted DNA for our city's environmental conditions.

We celebrate human diversity in terms of ethnicity, culture, and DNA, and so too, we might celebrate the innumerable benefits of botanical diversity. Too often, we narrowly focus on our biodiversity, thinking only about our native species.

With regard to our natives, there are thousands of times more native trees across urban Christchurch today than at the time of the city's establishment. A wonderful achievement and work is still in progress. However, in addition to natives, it is time to acknowledge and celebrate attributes of introduced trees and to plant more for the unique benefits they bestow.

One might reflect that outside the precious fragment of natural forest at Riccarton Bush, each tree of any stature has been planted by people now deceased. As such, each tree is a living memorial to those who planted them. They are gone, and thanks to their far-sightedness, parts of our city have become beautified and more enjoyable places in which to live.

Some areas of Christchurch are especially beautiful on account of the presence of large trees, the best having the feel of woodlands pockets of urban forest.

It is well known that the appeal and property values of neighbourhoods are strongly correlated with the density and scale of trees.

It is also well documented that mental health and well-being in urban areas is correlated with a strong presence of trees.

Trees provide privacy and shelter and screen much of the ugliness of our built environments. Imagine your neighbourhood devoid of trees.

And we know the benefits of trees, such as shelter or shade, or the safe habitat they provide for birds, or their striking presence, are, like their capacity to store carbon, directly related to their size and density of distribution. Urban woodlands where tall trees predominate have a far more positive impact than areas of small shrubby trees, which tragically typify today's subdivisions.

On this basis, we surely should establish more large trees across our city, knowing they will provide healthier and more attractive neighbourhoods, support more abundant birdlife, and, in autumn, with deciduous trees included to the mix, extravagant shows of colour.

Programs to make our city greener, healthier, wilder, and create urban forest areas are needed to make our city more equable, and a better place in which to live.

Mark Belton



Memorial Avenue trees



Woodland beside the Avon



A canopied view from the hill