

Meadows of Highland Landscape Plan – Tree Project

History

Early in 2006, the Board of MOH began to address a long ignored situation on our property – the health of our tree population. It had become increasingly clear that there were issues that needed to be investigated and a plan put into place. The Austrian Pines that dominated phases 1 and 2 were suffering from tip blight and their demise would change the look and feel of the property dramatically, and to our detriment.

The trees are a valuable asset because:

- They dampen road noise and help absorb some noise between the buildings themselves.
- They provide shade and reduce temperatures around the buildings in the summer
- They act as wind breaks and reduce tunneling winds between the buildings
- They increase privacy
- The shade they provide helps reduce loss of ground moisture in the summer months – particularly helpful in clay soil
- And most importantly, they help maintain and increase our property values

Our landscape is what makes MOH such a beautiful place to live, and visitors here never fail to mention how beautiful the property is with its many trees. Many other homeowners associations are not as lucky, and have relatively barren property in comparison. In fact our arborist has used MOH as an example to other associations who have visited here to see what we have done.

The Board engaged George Schichtel, Sr., a well known grower in the Springville area who supplies wholesale trees to nurseries throughout the country. More to the point, George had been, at that time, consulting with a variety of entities – towns, parks and country clubs – and providing advice and offering suggestions on landscape projects and tree populations.

When contacted, George was eager to visit our property and provide guidance free of charge. During our initial meeting, he walked the property with the Landscape Committee to make a visual inspection and note the strengths and weaknesses of our campus and tree population. He noted the following:

- That we were blessed with a very unique piece of land that encompassed meadow areas, woods, the pond area, open spaces, and buildings that were both sheltered from the road and each other by trees
- That we had significant issues with tree health that needed to be addressed
- That the property be protected as a natural park like setting, to highlight its unique features as well as reduce maintenance in the long run.
- That we needed the assistance of a skilled arborist who was experienced in maintaining a property such as this and addressing tree health.
- That the only arborist that he would recommend for a situation such as this was Bob Hoag, whom he called the “tree whisperer” and who excelled in natural landscapes.

Subsequent to our initial meeting, Bob Hoag was contacted and said he was interested in meeting with us to canvas the property. A second meeting was set up with the Landscape Committee and an extensive survey was done of the property with both Bob and George in attendance.

Problems Noted During the Walkaround

1. Mulch Rings Around Trees

Many of free standing trees on the property had mulch rings around them, which were of no benefit and served no purpose to the trees. In addition, mulch had built up quite high over time to produce mulch volcanoes at the tree base. This was problematic for several reasons.

- 1) The bark of trees is meant to be above ground. Built up mulch causes the bark to remain moist and invites disease and pests.
- 2) Mulch is an easier medium for trees to push roots into, and encourages trees to develop smaller superficial roots, rather than developing the deeper stabilizing roots they need to thrive for the long haul. Deep roots anchor the trees into the earth and also allows them to absorb moisture from deep within the ground, which is important during dry spells.
- 3) The surface roots that develop within the mulch begin to circle the base of the tree and can lead to the development of “girdling roots”. Girdling roots, as they enlarge, can actually choke off the deeper roots the tree needs to absorb nutrients and water. Ultimately it can kill the tree.
- 4) It costs a lot more to mulch around free standing trees, as well as the weeding and upkeep, in addition to fostering an environment detrimental to the trees.
- 5) There are two exceptions to mulching:
 - a. New plantings – when newly planted, mulch is applied around the tree to help maintain ground moisture over the disturbed soil, while the trees are getting settled and recovering from planting trauma. But after a year or two, the mulching should be discontinued. The mulch should not however touch the bark.

- b. Trees that are located within shrub beds. When a bed is being mulched clearly the area around the tree will be as well. However, the mulch should never touch the bark or be allowed to build up.

2. Lack of Diversity in the Tree Population

In phases 1 and 2, the vast majority of the trees were Austrian Pines, Maples and Crabapples. Phase 3 was dominated by Spruce, Ash and Crabapples. While we shouldn't have a hodge podge of different trees all over the property, it was important to consider diversifying our species so that we were not so prone to diseases that could wipe out a large portion of our inventory all at once. Maples in particular represented too many of our deciduous tree.

3. Improper Tree Pruning

Without a clear landscape plan to address trees, nor a tree budget prior to 2005-6, much of the tree pruning on the property had been done by work crews of homeowners. It got the job done, and at no cost, but much of the pruning was done improperly further imperiling the long term health of our trees. Improper pruning can lead to decay and invites pests to invade. In addition, some of the pruning was unsightly and counter to the natural form, shape and natural intent of the tree species. Bob Hoag felt very strongly that homeowners no longer do any tree pruning on the property.

4. Austrian Pines

There were 119 Austrian Pines on the property from the MOH entrance down to, and including, Phase 2. Diplodia tip blight was present in many of the trees. Diplodia tip blight is a fungal disease that infects the new growth during bud break in the late spring. It spreads mostly readily if it is particularly rainy during bud break. While many of the trees were infected, some were not. Trees, like people, have different genetics and so some of the Austrians may prove to be more resistant in the long haul. But it is a funny disease in that some trees that appear to be badly infected seem to hang on for longer periods of time than expected, while some who seem to be lightly infected suddenly turn completely brown and die very rapidly.

5. Maple Trees

Maple trees comprised the majority of the deciduous trees on the property, and more diversification was needed. In addition, many of the maples were showing problems as they aged. First, it was clear that many had girdling roots, which were exacerbated by the tree rings. It was also possible that some were planted too deep initially or that the roots were also bound in root balls before planting – something we will never know. But it was clear we were going to lose some of the very large maples on the property in time from girdling roots.

6. Crabapple Trees

The crabapple trees on the property are of older varieties and susceptible to a couple of fungal diseases, most especially apple scab. In the spring the trees bloom beautifully and leaf out, but by mid summer the leaves are dying and dropping from the trees. They aren't dead and the trees are otherwise mostly healthy, but they can appear unsightly. Wet springs exacerbate the problem. It is difficult to control, but the spraying with a fungicide several times in the spring can help. But that can be costly and is not always completely effective. Newer strains of crabapple trees are resistant to these problems.

7. Ash Trees in Phase 3

While the ash borer was not a problem in this area in 2006, it was gradually moving north and would eventually arrive here. Ash trees are prominent in the driveway and parking areas of Phase 3. Eventually we were going to need to address that situation. Ultimately we began injections into the Ash trees, which need to be applied once every three years. I believe they received 2 injections, 3 years apart, before that ceased due to indecision and miscommunication. That has prolonged their life way beyond the life of other ash trees in the area, though most are now infected.

8. Time of the Essence

As both George and Bob pointed out, time was working against us with tree health. Recognizing that it takes at least 15-20 years for newly planted trees to begin making an impact, they stressed the need to begin aggressive planting right away or we might end up with a much more barren landscape for a long period of time. Their emphasis was to plant now, both underplanting and side planting, and maintain as many trees as long as we possibly could, to prevent a severe impact on the property and its value. The intent was never to take down and then plant, but rather to plant and take down only when absolutely necessary.

9. Consult with a Landscape Architect for Additional Ideas

George and Bob's observations and recommendations were obviously valid, but they thought it might be of further benefit to us to engage a landscape architect who might have additional thoughts or ideas.

10. Shagbark Hickory Trees

We are blessed to have a natural stand of Shagbark Hickory trees on the property, in Phase 2 and Phase 3. They are indigenous to the area and cannot be purchased from nurseries because they first develop a very deep taproot (more than a few feet deep) before they show any appreciable above ground growth. They should be protected. We have tried on a number of occasions to harvest some of the nuts before the squirrels get them, to try to get them to sprout. To date, the attempts have not worked out well, though

will be tried again this year. I recently located a grower in Pennsylvania who has developed an ingenious growing system that lends itself to shipping and planting.

11. Natural Stand of American Beech Trees

Another natural stand of valuable trees is the grove of American Beech trees behind Building 3 at the edge of the woods. These are also valuable hardwood trees. Beech trees have shallow broad roots very near the surface. We need to be careful that we do not dump soil, leaves or other materials in the woods near them, as burying their roots deeper under debris will cause them damage.

2006 Decisions and Actions

Armed with the information and recommendations from both George and Bob, the Landscape Committee recommended the following to the Board.

- Continue with the natural parklike setting for the property
- Remove the tree rings from all trees not in beds
- Hire Bob Hoag to begin addressing tree issues and pruning
- Discontinue pruning by association members
- Consult with a landscape architect for additional ideas
- Adopt a plant now (and take down only when absolutely necessary in the future) game plan
- First planting scheduled for the fall of 2006 would be large.
- A few dead trees would be removed

We consulted with Connie Lydon, a landscape architect, and she agreed with everything that Bob and George recommended and did not believe she had anything further to recommend, especially since tree plantings would be driven by the most important needs each season based on the health of our current stock.

Two of us on the Landscape Committee spent the summer removing the dozens of tree rings around various trees, especially the maples. It became apparent very quickly that surface root growth in mulch rings was a significant problem. It was a tedious and back breaking task to remove the compacted mulch and break up the root mats. As we finished removing the tree rings, Bob chose selected maples with girdling roots, where he thought excavating and cutting might save the trees in the long run. Bob also began pruning cross branches within the maple canopies that were badly overgrown and detrimental to tree health, as well as trimming Austrian Pines of dead infected branches during dry periods. He also took down a few dead trees.

In the fall, Bob, George and I walked the property and chose the locations and types of trees that would be planted, in the areas of greatest need. Stakes were placed in the ground to mark the positions and a list of selections was provided to the Landscape

Committee and the Board. George said that he would give us the trees as wholesale prices, given the significant amount and also because he loved working on the project here. The entrance to MOH and all along the road up to the entrance to Phase 2 was the focus.

Subsequent Years

For the majority of years since 2006, we have continued to plant in the same manner, addressing the most pressing needs each year depending upon tree health. All 3 phases have seen significant plantings as well as pruning. I believe there were 3 years when we did not plant. The first was in 2013, when we unfortunately lost Bob Hoag very rapidly to a brain tumor in the fall. Starting in 2014, Joe Rauscher took over as our arborist. He was Bob's protégé and has been involved in the project here from the very beginning, so there is continuity and the same approach as Bob. We have been very lucky in that regard. We did not plant last year as we could not meet the planting deadline in time and the tree budget was used for tree removal instead.

Yearly Routine and Timing

There is a fairly set routine each year for the timing of various steps in the overall landscape plan.

- Early spring (late March, early April) is the ideal time to prune crabapple trees before they bud out – it causes the least amount of stress and helps the tree put more energy into new growth. This is not done routinely – usually every 4 years or so. (This can also be done in the winter during the trees' dormant period.
- Mulching and weeding is done as part of the landscape contract, and is done in May. Additional weeding is done occasionally as needed
- Pruning of shrubs (around garages and utility beds) occurs usually in July or when the new growth has hardened off and is better for shrub health. This is also part of the landscape contract
- End of summer is the best time to assess tree health and that is when Joe (and previously Bob) and I do our walk around, assess health, determine if some trees need to be removed, identify limbs that need to be trimmed, and plan new planting for the year. Once completed, it is reviewed by the Landscape Committee and then recommendations are made to the Board.
- Early October is generally when new plantings go in (other than bare root trees) as trees are not expending energy to grow above ground at that time and rain is generally more plentiful. New trees need to be routinely deep watered for their first 3 years while they get established.
- Additional projects as needed throughout the season and performed by Joe

Planting Choices

What and where we plant are guided by some general principles that were originally laid out by Bob Hoag, and have continued with Joe Rauscher.

- Choose trees and shrubs that will thrive in this area
- Choose species that are congruent with the tree population and property we have, but that will also give us some diversity
- Choose species that will enhance a particular area and its unique characteristics.
- Choose species that are not going to require a lot of constant upkeep to hold costs down
- Plant trees in appropriate spots for their species, rather than expecting to have the tree adapt or be pruned according to our wishes. Let the tree be what it wants to be, otherwise it will likely be unhappy and we will lose (one of Bob Hoag's guiding principles).
- Plant shrubs that will enhance areas or provide additional layered privacy but that do not require shaping or pruning (or at least very little) in order to hold down cost. Pruning shrubs properly (not electric hedge trimmers!) is time consuming and thus adds to landscape costs

Current State of Austrian Pines

Out of the original 119 Austrian Pines that were on the property, we have 63 remaining. Some absolutely had to be removed because of advanced disease or death and a few were removed a little before their time. But the latter also give us an opportunity to plant in a less constrained fashion. Many of the Austrians that originally looked horrible, actually look a lot healthier. With removal of the most diseased limbs, in conjunction with dry weather during bud break a number of years, their lives have been extended and they actually have a few years of new growth that is not diseased. This gives the newer plantings additional time to grow and have a significant presence – exactly what we hoped for, and more time to plant others that will eventually replace them. Ultimately we should hope that many are resistant to diplodia tip blight and remain a presence for the long term. In general, the remaining Austrians are a lot healthier than they were many years ago.

Current State of Maple Trees

A number of the maple trees that Bob identified as ones that would ultimately die, either have died (and have been removed) or are now showing signs of decline. In one instance we planted a companion maple alongside and that tree is healthy and growing well and so will fill in that gap.

Current State of the Ash Trees

While the injections did a good job of protecting our Ash population for many years, some are clearly infected with Ash Borer now. Underplantings and some take downs are in our near future.

Current Year Focus

While Joe and I won't do our walk around for another week-10 days or so, there are clearly some areas that need to be addressed this year.

- The Phase 3 Ash population, as well as an Ash behind building 7 (street side) and one behind unit 90. I anticipate that we will need to do some heavy trimming in order to underplant around the Phase 3 parking area this year. We likely will not plant as many replacements as the number of trees that will need to eventually be taken down around the parking area, because that area was too densely planted to start with – something that both Bob and George said in the beginning, and which Joe has stated more recently.
- A number of ornamental trees have died or are declining, most especially in the courtyard area behind buildings 4 and 5, need to be replaced.
- A redbud will be planted next to Jim DePerno's old garage
- A couple of other trees that were planted (in various locations) did not survive and need to be replaced.
- Other tree plantings to be determined during upcoming survey
- Some dead limbs need to be trimmed off in various places throughout the property.
- The old crabapple trees by the garages encompassing unit 78, can now be removed as the underplanted redbuds have thrived and have reached a good size.
- More plantings to be determined
- Some large limbs of black willows need to be removed that are leaning towards buildings
- Other issues identified during survey

In addition to the above, the Landscape Committee has been working on clearing out the most egregious utility beds and have begun to replant with ornamental grasses and black eyed susans, in a manner similar to the utility bed behind Nick Baich. Most of the work has been done by committee members, with heavy labor support by Joe and Brendon. This work will continue but will take time (and muscle).

Other Concerns and Issues on the Property

Common Property Creep

Long ago, a number of homeowners were granted permission to plant personal gardens around utility beds and on other common property. While they looked pretty at the time, we have encountered issues with this practice. When the homeowner moves, or sadly passes away, these areas lie on common property but aren't necessarily in the landscaping contract because owners have been providing upkeep. The areas quickly become unsightly and overgrown. The new owners of those units are not required to care for them because it is not part of the property they purchased. A couple of these areas have recently been repatriated, but it is an additional cost to the association. It would be best if this practice was discontinued as the situation is impractical.

Requests to Take Down Common Property Trees

There have been a number of requests by homeowners to take down common property trees because of personal preference. This is a practice fraught with problems, and will result in an unfair situation. If allowed for all, we will see way too many trees being removed for no good reason other than preference, and this works counter to the tree project. If allowed for some, but not others, then it becomes extremely unfair to those who are not given the same opportunity and it will come back to bite the board. Everyone should be dealt with equally and common property trees should remain common property trees and not taken down because of personal preference. This is one of those freedoms we give up when we live in an association like this.

Requests to Individual Board Members

I know all too well that board members frequently get approached by unit owners about specific landscaping issues around their area. It is my hope that these issues are sent to the landscaping committee to assess, and then report to the board for action. This way issues are assessed in conjunction with the overarching landscape plan, and the right hand knows what the left hand is doing, rather than working at cross purposes.

Laurie Patterson
Member of Landscape Committee
August 2020