

Tree Planting in Southern California Connects Community with Environment

Growing trees in the concrete jungle brings neighbors benefits beyond beauty.

By David Hochman From [Reader's Digest](#)

Your street is definitely naked," Andy Lipkis was telling me as he squinted in the blazing sun at the concrete expanse outside our house in the Del Rey neighborhood of Los Angeles. "It's like someone said, 'Trees? Nah, don't need 'em here.'"

Lipkis would help me change all that. Years ago, as a 15-year-old camper in the San Bernardino Mountains, he'd noticed pine trees ravaged by smog and fire and had mobilized friends to plant a smog-tolerant variety in their place. A lifelong mission was born. As the president of [TreePeople](#), a nonprofit organization he founded in 1973, Lipkis, now 54, has inspired hundreds of thousands of volunteers to plant more than two million trees throughout Southern California.

TreePeople provides tools, blueprints, planting demonstrations, and tree-care supervisors free to would-be Johnny Appleseeds. And since I was tired of living on Ugly Street, that included me. Turning left out of my gate that morning, we passed nine houses before coming upon the first "tree," a squat, spiny thing even the pigeons seemed to fear. "You'll need their support," Lipkis said, referring to my neighbors. "Without a community behind you, the trees you plant will die in five years." So I started knocking on doors.

"Not interested!" came the voice from behind a steel security screen. I couldn't see the old man's face, but what better time to share what I'd learned in TreePeople's mandatory daylong seminar about the critical role of trees in removing smog from the atmosphere, cooling our homes, and preventing water runoff?

"Sir, did you know trees [increase property values](#) by as much as 15 percent?" I chirped. Nothing. "And it's free! We'll get grants to offset costs and secure the necessary permits. All I need is your signa -- "

I realized I was talking to myself. Strange as it may seem, some people are afraid of trees. "The roots destroy sidewalks," one neighbor said. "They'll ruin my pipes, and I don't want leaves," another told me.

I might have given up were the issue less critical. As Lipkis explains, American cities have lost roughly 20 percent of their trees in the last 25 years, mainly due to development. I also didn't want my five-year-old son, Sebastian, growing up on what looked like the main runway of LAX.

When I called Lipkis about the resistance I was getting, he encouraged me to "connect people to your trees." So Sebastian and my wife, Ruth, delivered homemade cookies while I went living room to living room with Photoshopped "after" pictures. Mostly, we spent time meeting neighbors we had never taken the time to appreciate. Don's family had been living on the block since the area was a celery farm four generations earlier. Robert, a retired chemist of Japanese descent, had chosen this quiet area after World War II to escape discrimination. Before we knew it (actually, it took six months), we had signed permission forms from 16 neighbors for 21 trees -- a small forest -- and I had papers to

process, soil samples to test, and funds to secure.

When the big day arrived, I was excited -- and nervous. What if I threw a tree planting and nobody came? But as I set out shovels and Ruth and Sebastian built pyramids of bagels and doughnuts, volunteers started to gather. Friends brought friends. Neighbors came with cousins and grandchildren. A local middle school showed up with half the seventh grade. More than 100 people lent their muscle to get six Brisbane Box and fifteen Golden Medallion trees into the ground.

Then Lipkis led us in a ritual as old as TreePeople itself: welcoming each tree into the world and giving it a name. Afterward, as I held hands with the volunteers and former strangers I now knew as neighbors, I couldn't help but feel we'd accomplished something profound in getting the saplings into the ground -- and adding life to our dormant little block. "Trees need people," we said in unison, "and people need trees."

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