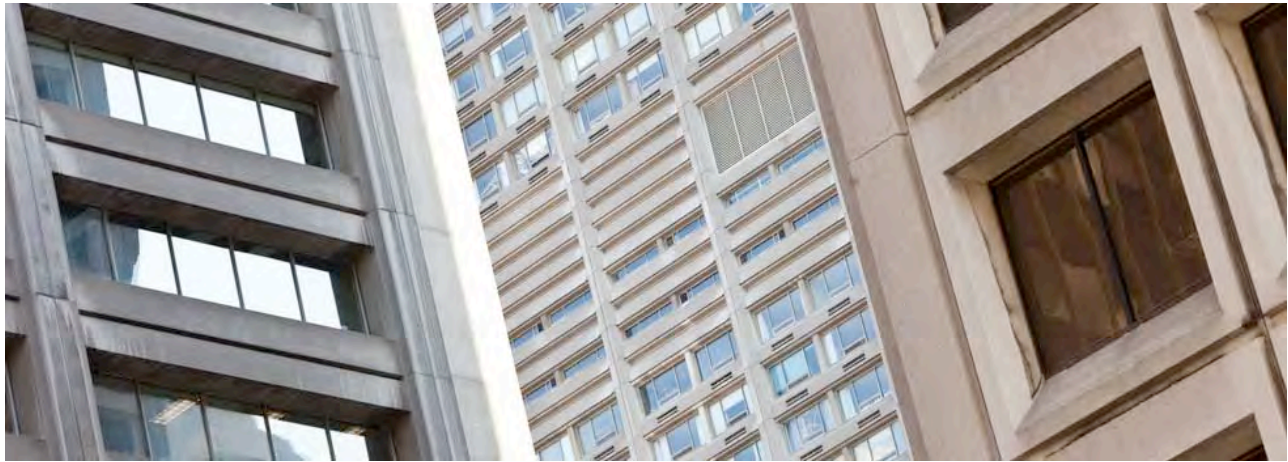


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ANDY KENNEY - TANJA TIZIANA

A city in a forest -- the business of Toronto's urban forest is growing

PAUL GALLANT
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Some people can't see the forest for the trees. Andy Kenney looks around and sees the forest everywhere, even in the most densely-packed areas of Toronto's urban landscape.

A senior lecturer on [urban forestry at the University of Toronto](#), Kenney's interest in urban trees, and the benefits their green canopy provides us, extends well beyond the classroom. Over the years, Kenney, like other tree advocates, has realized that people are increasingly eager to do more to maintain our urban forest, and that innovative business people are eager to help them do it.

More than a decade ago, Kenney realized that getting city residents to plant trees was a no-brainer as home owners usually enjoy greening their properties. But the pollution and added wear and tear of city life mean that newly planted urban trees have a much tougher time of it than their rural counterparts; they tend to survive only seven years. Meanwhile, Toronto's older stock of maples is deteriorating with age. Both forces have made the city's goal of doubling its tree canopy an uphill climb. So, with the assumption that you can't fix a problem until you know what's there, Kenney and one of his former students launched a program to train citizens how to do tree inventories in their neighbourhoods.

Called Neighbourwoods, the program provides attendees with a couple of training sessions about how to identify different species, the optimal conditions for each species and how to tell if a tree is seriously unhealthy. This month, for example, the not-for-profit organization [LEAF](#) teamed up with the city's [Live Green Toronto](#) program to have Kenney provide free training for a group in Leslieville/Riverdale.

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"We wanted to see if we could get volunteers to engage in urban forestry beyond tree planting. Long-term stewardship seemed to be falling through the cracks," says Kenney. "Once residents have this great information, they've got this interest built up and we hope they will take it further."

Although a healthy urban forest benefits the city as a whole—reducing the urban-heat-island effect, providing shade, creating natural beauty and cleaning the air—between 70 and 80 percent of Toronto's is on private property. That means it's mostly up to individuals and communities, rather than the government, to maintain the green canopy. Kenney's workshops offer a first step: taking a good look at what you've got. How diverse are the trees in an area? Are the trees all reaching maturity at the same time? Are there problems that need immediate attention of a professional arborist?

Once residents have a better sense of the size and health of the urban forest in their area, there's the more pressing question of what to do about it. Growing awareness of the importance of healthy trees has created an appetite for new solutions. With people willing to spend more money on their trees, arborists, landscape architects, engineers, developers and product-creators are finding new ways to meet the demands.

"In the old days, you'd take care of trees by spraying them with pesticides every three months and then cutting them down when they're dead," says Todd Irvine, a consultant at [Bruce Tree Expert Company](#) and a [new columnist for Eye Weekly](#), who has worked with both Kenney and LEAF. "Ten years ago, tree companies cut down trees. There weren't that many options. Now companies are coming up with all kinds of ideas."

For example, the Oakville-based [Techno Metal Posts](#) isn't the greenest-sounding name for a company, but their approach to building foundations is much less damaging to tree root systems than conventional techniques. Founded about five years ago, the company uses Canadian-made steel screw piles to support structures like home additions, garages, cottages and retaining walls, all without excavation.

"With a concrete foundation, you have to dig and you're killing roots," says owner Roger Lauzon. "We can put the helix [the head of the giant screw that provides support for the structure] under the roots. When people hear about what we do, they'll suggest it to their contractor who comes and finds us."

When excavation is necessary, Irvine points out that companies like [Super Sucker Hydro Vac](#), based in Ancaster, can use water and a high-powered vacuum system to remove soil without cutting into roots (or pipes or wires, for that matter).

Back at grade, companies like [Green Innovations](#) in Pickering offer ways to prevent surface uses from hurting trees. Their porous paving system for gardens is a high-density plastic grid that disperses the weight of vehicles over a larger area. The grid looks more natural than asphalt and prevents the soil from becoming compacted, which can damage roots. The grid also allows rainwater to permeate the soil, reducing the need for irrigation and improving storm-water management, a big problem in Toronto's concrete jungle.

"There's definitely been an increase in consumer awareness," says Walter Hermann, who started Green Innovations in 2006. "But it's also that the engineers and product creators have realized that we can't stay with the status quo."

Irvine points out that some of the appetite for new ways to improve tree health is driven by regulation. Although the existing bylaws protecting urban trees date back at least 14 years, increased enforcement, mega-city bylaw harmonization and newer rules targeting properties along ravines have applied firmer pressure.

"Ask any reputable engineer or architectural firm if the bylaws have made them reconsider what they do, the answer would be yes," says Irvine. "People will complain, but after a few years they stop grumbling about it."

For Kenney, different parts of the city require different forestry strategies. In newer suburbs, it's about nurturing new growth through strategic pruning, reducing damage and managing pests. In the old city, it's about finding the space to replace trees nearing the end of their lives. Through the Neighbourwoods program, he hopes that residents will not only do a better job of taking care of trees themselves, but also do a better job of choosing professionals who know what they're doing.

"As awareness of homeowners increases, that improves the market, which can offer a higher level of training and ethics. And it creates jobs," says Kenney.

Paul Gallant is a Toronto-based freelance writer who lives in the emerging Brockton Triangle neighbourhood.

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