

# CRC Maintenance Work Takes Center Stage During the Summer of Covid



During the Covid 19 crisis, large group activities had to be cancelled, but the needs of our local watersheds remain. CRC decided to focus on maintenance. To that end, this summer CRC's Tree Planting Coordinator David Hilbert spent 30-odd hours a week between prior planting sites, working on caging upkeep and replacement, and generally making sure that the trees and shrubs are healthy and growing well.

CRC caught up with David at Smedley Park in Springfield, where he was moving and adjusting cages and removing nonnative weeds. Trees eventually outgrow their cages and require new ones. David is there to make sure that happens, recycling existing caging wherever he can.

Caging prevents deer from nibbling the leaves that are the tree's food processing factories. Later, caging keeps deer from rubbing on the trees to mark their territory, potentially damaging young trees' thin bark. (In Smedley, caging also protects the trees from the elusive beavers who live there.) Finally, caging offsets the most insulting risk: of "girdling" by human held string trimmers, used to cut grass as it leads right up to a tree trunk. "Below the outer bark is a green layer that is only a millimeter thick," David says. "String trimmers cut all the way around so the tree can't regenerate tissue



and over the course of a year, the tree will die. Most landscapers are trained to avoid that, but not everyone does."

In addition to Smedley, David has been working at the Newtown Square ballfields, the Serpentine Preserve in Malvern, Crozer Park in Chester, and Aston's Lewis Fisher Park.

Back in Smedley, David points out various nonnative plants. "Not all nonnative plants are evil," he says. "As long as they are not destructive to the habitat, they aren't necessarily a problem." And sometimes the term "nonnative" can be misleading. Some honey locusts in our watersheds grew thousands of years ago, spread mainly with the help of the woolly mammoth. "Post ice age there haven't been any," he says. "But they aren't exactly nonnative."



It is easy to be exasperated by invasive nonnative plants, but as David points out almost all were brought here on purpose – many during the colonial period. "Many woody invasives come from plant collectors," he says. "In fact, the most pernicious ones have their source in Philadelphia."

David is also fond of shrubs, defined by their multi-stemmed and outwards growth, and which provide an important part of a healthy riparian buffer. But while shrubs' density may provide some protection, shrubs need cages too. He points out a dogwood shrub, caged for 5 years. It's very sturdy and bushy – plenty of leaves and stalks, and growing nicely. Nearby, a similar species lost its cage at some point and looks far different: deer have been munching on the leaves and most are missing, leaving a twiggy looking plant that barely resembles its cousin.



Despite its relative health, David sets to work removing some vines that are climbing the first specimen. Both, porcelain berry and Japanese honeysuckle, are hard to tell from the Dogwood unless cut (the weeds' stems are hollow) or if, like David, someone knows how to read the differences in leaves. "Weeds often mimic the native plants they are bothering," he says. "It's an evolutionary strategy."

Among CRC's other additions to Smedley are birches, red maple, sweet gum, sycamore, black gum and tulip poplar, all chosen specifically for this lowland site, which experiences light flooding.

This matching of trees to the correct area is trickier than it might seem, given the wide differentiation in the Chester Ridley Crum Watersheds soil and microclimates.



"In general, our soil is rich clay and silt. The glacial line stops 50-60 miles north of here. We have 40+ inches of rain a year. Good seasonality," he says. "It's an ideal place for plants to grow."

Garrett Williamson in Newtown Square, a north facing valley, is the coldest area in our watersheds. The City of Chester is the warmest, he says. (If undeveloped, Chester might be covered in magnolias).

David looks forward to new collaboration and projects between CRC and Chester businesses, government and residents. "All the streams in our watersheds end there," he says. "Chester suffered a lot of bad luck but there are plenty of parks. Not all are well loved and appreciated."

An explorer at heart, David enjoys the diversity within the CRC Watersheds. During a recent walk at Crozer Park in Chester, David and his girlfriend Caitlin walked upstream into a patch of woods. "It was like a primeval forest," he marveled. "It feels so far away from Philadelphia."

