

EDITORIAL

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Greenery Within Our Grasp

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If you cruise 10 miles on Pico Boulevard through the heart of Los Angeles and look at the hundreds of city trees that dot the sidewalks, you could laugh — or cry.

At Catalina Street, someone whacked off the top of a ficus. The lush foliage that's grown back on this squat trunk is sculpted into a fat lollipop.

A jacaranda sapling near Fairfax Avenue has given up the ghost, its wispy branches curled and lifeless, with smashed beer bottles at its base.

Just east of Sepulveda Boulevard, a maniacal pruner buzzed each branch on another ficus, then shaved off the leaves. New green leaves sprout along those branches like moss on soggy redwoods.

These are a few of the 680,000 publicly owned or controlled trees that Los Angeles Street Tree Division workers struggle to maintain. City officials boast that L.A.'s trees make up the largest urban forest in the nation. Bad planting choices, congestion, vigilante pruners and decades of strapped budgets are jeopardizing this green resource.

But the city is stepping up efforts to safeguard its trees.

In recent decades, the keepers of public greenery, known as arborists, have pushed the notion of a sustainable urban forest. They point out that tree roots trap and filter rainwater and reduce ocean-fouling runoff. Leafy trees give off oxygen, shade sweltering streets and muffle engine noise.

City managers have completed a computerized inventory of Los Angeles' urban forest, detailing the variety, condition and approximate age of the public's trees. This database can tell arborists when a tree was last pruned, signal them to replace dying trees or raise an alert when those buckling sidewalks turn into a liability hazard. Sustainability requires trees of different ages along a block to ensure continuing shade and green when older trees die. Cities already using a computerized management system — including Milwaukee, Chicago and Santa Monica — credit it with keeping trees healthy and lush.

City arborists also need predictable funds, and that requires local officials who see the ecological benefit of maintaining public trees. Finally, success demands residents who see trees as resources, not nuisances. The city's nascent sidewalk repair may help change that perspective and stop some of the vigilante pruning.

Over the last three years, city crews have replaced 262 miles of the most treacherous stretches of sidewalk, cutting roots and replacing overgrown or dying trees. But many more years and buckets of money will be needed to resurface the 4,620 miles of sidewalk identified as dangerous.

Neighborhood councils and groups like TreePeople and North East Trees can also help residents who often feel stuck and frustrated better care for the city's leafy heritage.