



# How to Interpret Trees

**TREE CITY USA®  
BULLETIN**

No. **33**

Editor: Dr. James R. Fazio • \$3.00

*Interpretation should be considered an important part of any community forestry program. Programs that teach people about trees can have significant impacts both on the individual lives they touch and on support for community tree programs.*

Some years ago in the City of Pittsburgh there lived a young boy who was clearly headed for trouble. His parents were at wit's end, his teachers tried everything from detention to expulsion, and school counselors agreed that the lad was looking at jail by the time he was 20.

Then one Saturday morning the boy was sent to a program at what was then the Wissahickon Nature Museum. There, surrounded by the quiet woods of Riverview Park, he was introduced to the world of trees. In the course of a year, he looked at dormant buds under a hand lens, dug through the debris of leaves and twigs on the forest floor, made a plaster cast of a raccoon track, held the caged animals, and saw spectacular slide shows and films presented by men and women he came to admire.

Nature worked its charm and conservation gained a new friend for life. Interpretation was the catalyst. I can attest to its power, because the young boy was me.

What happened to me had nothing to do with the Latin names of trees or the science of timber management. That came later in college. What did work were simple, interesting revelations about nature in an urban, wooded enclave and presented by a few caring individuals in a fun-filled way.

Interpreting trees and nature in our communities is an opportunity available to every tree board member and professional forester or arborist. All it requires is a



Community interpretive centers, like this one outside of Denton, Nebraska, can make an important difference for the future.

little knowledge, some imagination, and a lot of desire to share your love of nature with others and translate technical information into terms that: (1) attract attention, and (2) provide understanding. The goal of environmental interpretation is not to make scientists out of lay people, but rather to help anyone from any walk of life relate to the natural world around them. The ultimate achievement of interpretation is to have someone interested in learning more.

In this bulletin are some general concepts about interpretation and some guidelines to use in interpreting trees in your community.

# What Is Interpretation?

Interpretation is a special form of communication. It has been called attractive communication, or “laymanizing” the technical. Rather than traditional instruction or the presentation of facts, the purpose of interpretation is to reveal meanings and relationships. Sometimes facts help do this, but only if they are a conduit to something larger and more important.

In addition, interpretation must be attractive communication. This is because it is nearly always directed at a non-captive audience. In short,

interpretation must be pleasurable, relevant, well-organized and focused on a specific theme.

Ultimately, the goal of interpretation is to excite interest and to motivate. When done with skill, it may result in the individual wanting more details, or in changing an attitude, or even in making some kind of positive change in behavior. Think for a moment what applications the interpretation of trees could mean for urban and community forestry in your area.

## WHAT INTERPRETATION CAN DO

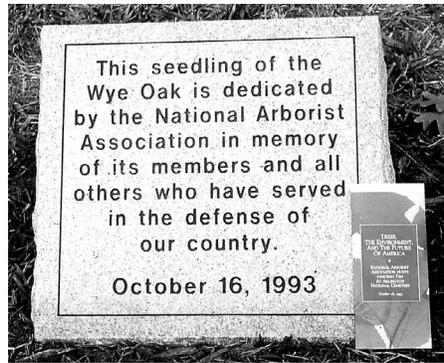
- ☑ Create interest in trees and tree care.
- ☑ Alert residents to problems facing the community forest.
- ☑ Introduce young people to the natural environment.
- ☑ Reduce vandalism.
- ☑ Foster support for community forestry.
- ☑ Provide understanding about urban ecology.
- ☑ Increase attendance at tree events.
- ☑ Inspire people to read more about trees and tree care.
- ☑ Encourage planting more trees.
- ☑ Earn points toward a Tree City USA Growth Award for your community.



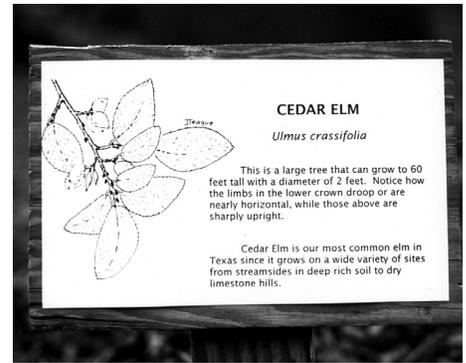
Sharing a love for nature is the essence of interpretation. The venerable John Muir once wrote of childhood experiences outdoors: “How utterly happy it made us! Nature streaming into us, wooingly teaching her wonderful, glowing lessons so unlike the dismal, grimashes and cinders so long thrashed into us. Here, without knowing it, we still were in school; every lesson a love lesson, not whipped but charmed into us.”



An attractive, highly legible name label is inexpensive but helpful.



This sign provides both the name of the tree and a point of interest.



Notice an effort to communicate informally and to make the information interesting and insightful.

## WHAT TO INTERPRET

Subjects for interpretation are endless. Even narrowing a topic to “trees” provides little guidance. Assuming that you want to go beyond simply identifying trees for people, careful thought must be given to developing themes, or central messages, for your interpretive efforts. The first task, then, is to decide why interpretation is needed. That is, how can it best contribute to the mission of the community forestry program? To do this, review long-range and annual plans (See Bulletin No. 29) or think about the challenges facing trees and better tree care in your area.

### EXAMPLE THEMES:

- Trees are a valuable community asset that need regular care to maintain value and not become a liability.
- Tree health depends on carefully matching trees to planting sites and providing proper care.

Next, develop a list of specific objectives. Objectives should relate to the theme(s). They provide the focus to communication that increases your chances of being effective. Ensure your objectives are clear so you can measure their success later.

### EXAMPLE OBJECTIVES:

- To make all residents of Acerville aware of five reasons why trees should not be topped.
- To have all schoolchildren in the community experience the pleasure of planting a tree and knowing how to nurture it to maturity (including protecting its bark from lawnmowers and bicycle damage).

## TAKE THIS TEST WHEN WRITING THE MESSAGE

There are some basic principles that can help you compete for the attention of your non-captive audience

and convey the information clearly. Whether preparing a radio announcement or an interpretive sign, use this checklist to increase the effectiveness of your message:

- Does it address your theme and objectives?
- Will it be enjoyable for the recipient to read, see, or hear?
- Are important ideas or new concepts limited to five or less? The mind processes “chunks” of new information best within that range.
- Will it attract attention? Whether it is the title of an exhibit or the opening lines in a talk or article, you have but a few seconds to capture interest. Something startling or highly relevant to the intended audience is among the ways to do this.
- Is it active? People respond best to movement, drama, personal involvement, and even active verbs in an article or sign (“Squirrels live in this tree,” not “Squirrels may be found in this tree.”)
- Is it personal? Tie the message to the natural interests of your audience, and address people directly. For example, “Planting one tree to shade your air conditioning unit can reduce your electric bill by 8 percent.”
- Is it brief? A good poster delivers its message in about four seconds. Most exhibits are viewed for less than 60 seconds.
- Have you enriched your text with illustrations, examples, and analogies?
- Have you explained the “why” behind any suggestions? “Don’t top trees” is not good enough. The reasons for not topping trees (See Bulletin No. 8) are more likely to convince the homeowner.
- Does it require a minimum effort to be seen, read, or heard? Clarity and good organization are keys here, plus getting the message to your intended audience. (Brochures on the counter at city hall would not reach as many people as placing the information on doorknobs.)

# Interpretive Trails

*Self-guiding trails offer an excellent way to interpret trees. Locations can be in parks, woodlands, plantations, arboretums, on school and other institutional grounds, or along bikeways, greenbelts and water corridors. By using directions and markers or a map instead of an actual trail tread, other possibilities include cemeteries, historical sites, and neighborhood streets. A major department store chain is even planning to place interpretive signs in the landscaping around its parking lots. With a little creative thought, any community can develop an interpretive trail to help its residents learn about trees.*



## REST BENCHES

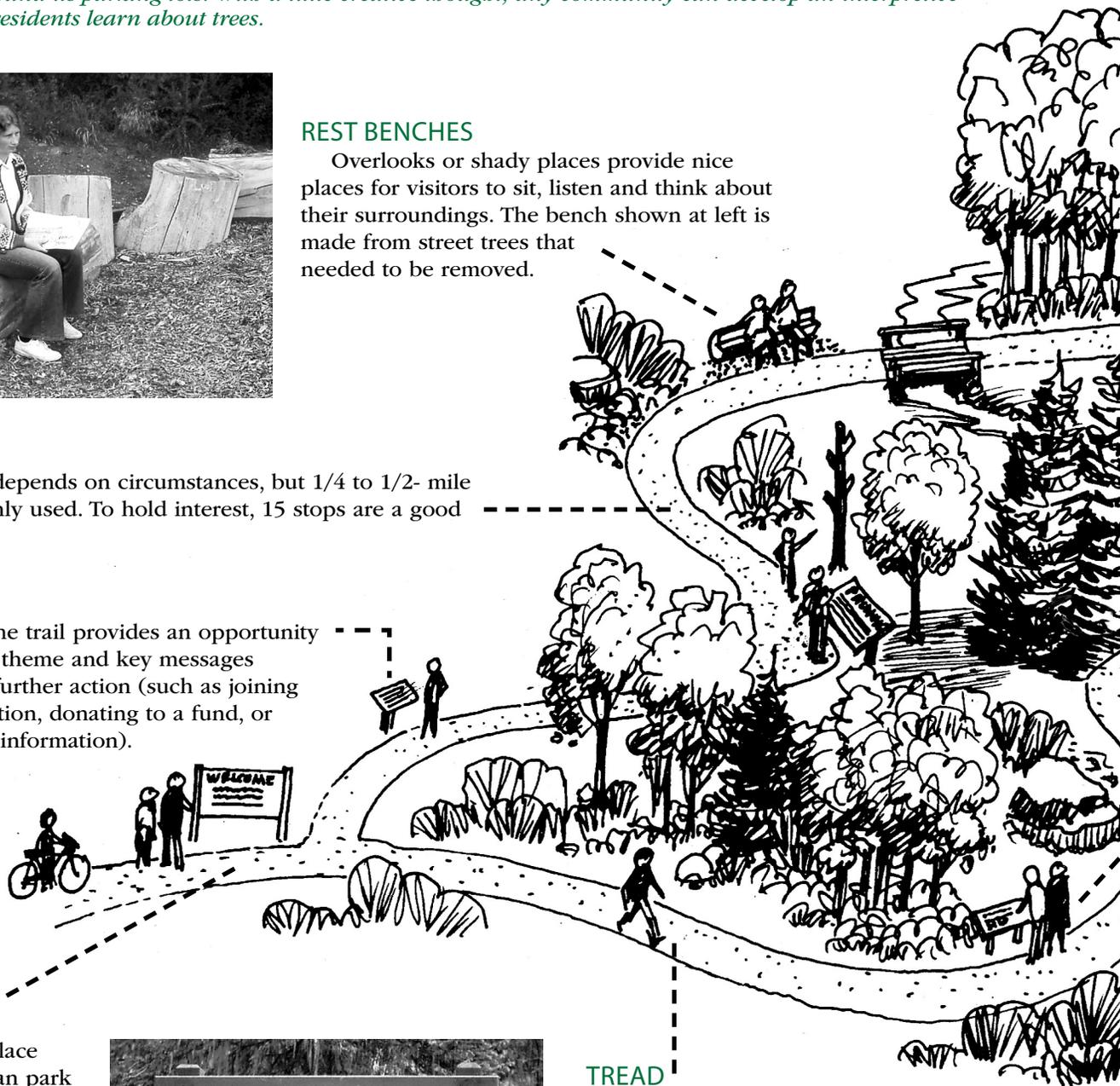
Overlooks or shady places provide nice places for visitors to sit, listen and think about their surroundings. The bench shown at left is made from street trees that needed to be removed.

## LENGTH

Trail length depends on circumstances, but 1/4 to 1/2- mile is most commonly used. To hold interest, 15 stops are a good maximum.

## CONCLUSION

The end of the trail provides an opportunity to reinforce the theme and key messages and to suggest further action (such as joining a local organization, donating to a fund, or obtaining more information).



## ENTRANCE

Locate in a place where people can park and gather safely away from traffic. Use a sign that harmonizes with its surroundings, makes visitors feel welcome, establishes the trail's theme, and displays any rules or warns of hazardous conditions.



## TREAD

Circumstances will dictate what kind of tread is needed. It may range from completely natural to hard pavement like asphalt. The principle to follow is to use a surface that provides safe, comfortable access, marks the route clearly, and prevents erosion, mud holes and root damage. Wood chips from municipal tree wastes can often be put to good use.



## DIRECTIONS

All trail junctions should be clearly marked. Using symbols keyed to booklets or maps allows for multiple themes on the same trail system.

## TREE LOCATOR

Pipes clamped in place, arrows painted on a slab of pavement, or movable disks as shown at right are among the ways to point out the shape, size or other identifying features of trees at a distance.



## LOOPS

Design your trail as a loop. If constructed as a figure eight or with multiple loops, visitors have the option of walking shorter or longer distances.

## FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

Signs in Braille with the same message next to them in large print can serve the blind, near-blind, and the perfectly sighted. Notice the nylon rope in the photo at right that guides blind visitors between stations and to the interpreted object.



## CURVES

A winding trail adds a sense of mystery, solitude, and spaciousness. To prevent short-cutting, curve the trail gradually.

## LEAFLET, SIGN, OR TAPE?

The purpose of each stop should be to focus attention on the interpreted object, explain its importance, and connect the object with the trail's theme. Each trail medium has its advantages and drawbacks, but regardless which one is used, the message must be delivered quickly and in an interesting way. A maximum of 60 words is recommended for leaflets and signs. In all cases, the interpreted object should be clearly visible. Being able to touch it — like tree bark — is even better.



Leaflets and numbered markers offer the least expensive and most vandal-resistant interpretive trail medium. Leaflets also have "take home value" and can include appendices such as appropriate tree to plant or instructions on proper pruning. Keeping dispensers full or otherwise making the leaflets available is the biggest problem posed by this method.



Signs appeal to visitors but can only be used where vandalism is light (such as well-lighted sites or where managers are in residence). Illustrations can add to attractiveness and clarity, and signs that involve the viewer in some way are even better. Signs should be on posts or railings rather than nailed to tree, just as the label on a work of art is placed on the frame rather than pasted onto the picture!



**TREE CITY USA**

Creating an interpretive trail or other new interpretive facility in your community can help qualify for a Tree City USA Growth Award.

This award program encourages communities to go beyond the four standards required for a Tree City USA award. Interpretive programs and facilities are eligible activities for the Growth Award—Education and Public Relations.

For more information, contact your state forester's office or the Arbor Day Foundation.

# More Ways to Interpret Trees

*Ways to interpret trees are limited only by the imagination. In addition to trails and signs, here are some ideas that have worked well. Would some of these be helpful in your community forestry program?*



**INTERPRETIVE CENTERS** of all sizes, shapes and levels of sophistication can enrich a community and promote a better understanding of urban ecology.



**EXHIBITS** offer an effective way to combine sound, illustrations, real objects and narrative information. Although many are permanently housed in an interpretive center, don't overlook opportunities for portable displays for schools, banks, public buildings, fairs and meetings.



**DEMONSTRATION SITES** are especially effective because they are visual proof of the possible. Windbreaks, attractive trees that are compatible with utilities, wildlife plantings and Xeriscape are among the demonstration sites currently being used.



**HISTORICAL AND UNUSUAL TREES** captivate the imagination and help gain public support for tree care and preservation. One method is to show the location of important trees on a map next to interpretive narrative in a brochure. Trees in the project are located with help from the public and those on private property are listed only with the owner's permission.



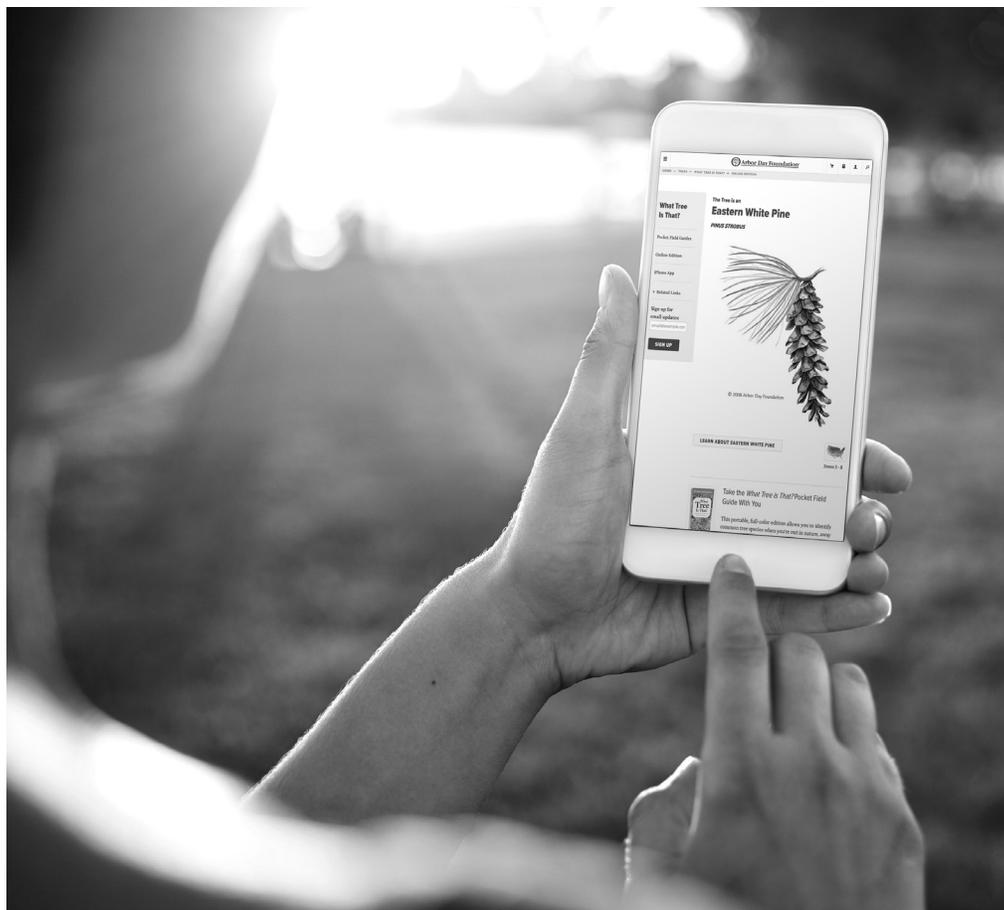
**MASS MEDIA** can be used to reach large numbers of people in a single effort. "Spontaneous" news features (rarely actually spontaneous, but rather initiated by calling an editor or reporter), as well as, planned newspaper articles and scheduled programs can be used effectively. An agency spokesperson can take advantage of the opportunity to explain to thousands of viewers why street trees and inventories are important.



Arbor Day programs are not the only way to interest school children in the promise and plight of trees. The use of **CHARACTERS, PUPPETS, PLAYS,** and other dramatization is effective with both children and adults.



**GUIDED WALKS AND ACTIVITIES** are powerful tools for interpreting trees. This is because you can adjust your presentation to the level of an audience's knowledge. Also, questions may be answered promptly and the audience can be actively involved—one of the surest ways to etch important information in memory.



Apps for mobile devices are increasingly popular as a way to identify trees, wild flowers, and animals in the field. This technology can also be used to interpret features on a nature trail or even trees scattered in a park or along streets.

# Interpretation for the Very Young

Interpretation for the ages of early childhood, say from 2 through 8, takes on an entirely different hue. The objective with this age group is not so much the interpretation of the technical into lay terms as it is simply to introduce children to nature. Importantly, this introduction must be in a way that is fun, hands-on, and structured enough to aid the development of physical, social, and mental abilities. It should enable the kind of childhood experiences and associations that produce pleasant memories.

Dimensions Educational Research Foundation has developed Nature Explore, a research-based program to address these special needs. The components of this program are designed to reconnect the digital generation with the wonders of nature and outdoor play. But it takes adults, including Tree City USA leaders, to provide the benefits of Nature Explore locally.

A few of the features of Nature Explore include:

- **Nature Explore Classrooms**, including help with site selection, design and construction.
- **Workshops** to train teachers and leaders at all levels of experience in how to more effectively work with young children.
- **Learning With Nature Idea Book** that explains the principles behind effective use of outdoor learning environments.
- **Nature Explore Sourcebook** as a one-stop way to purchase age-appropriate equipment and materials.
- **Nature Explore Club** to help teachers and families learn how to provide meaningful outdoor experiences for children.



Interpretation for young children requires a much different approach than for adults, but is just as essential.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION ...

For other sources of information about interpreting trees, please visit [arborday.org/bulletins](http://arborday.org/bulletins) and click on Bulletin No. 33.

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