

# Street trees worth saving

Lia Leendertz wonders why councils rush to replace old trees rather than extend their lives

The Vernon Oak, Melbourne Oak, Chelsea Road Elm and Duchess Lime: all names that conjure up the sort of beautiful old trees that give our cities and countryside grandeur and a sense of permanence. But these are the names of Sheffield street trees and already two of them – the Duchess Lime (one of an avenue of beautiful mature limes) and the Melbourne Oak (thought to be the oldest street tree in Sheffield at 450 years old) – have been reduced to woodchips, despite being in good health. A shadow hangs over the other two, just as it does over a great many more veteran Sheffield trees as part of the City Council's controversial highway maintenance programme, by which 5,500 trees have been removed in the past five years, with another 12,000 planned for the next 20 years.

The trees are being replaced with young saplings where the Council considers it too expensive to do remedial works: a thin silver lining, but saplings are no replacement for 450-year-old trees. Among the many things lost is the spectacle such mature trees create, the echo of repetition down avenues, suddenly hit with yawning gaps filled by tiny trees of different

species. And wildlife perching in the branches: the Chelsea Road Elm, at 120 years old, is one of the few mature elm trees in the country not to have been hit by Dutch elm disease (beyond the strongholds of Brighton and Edinburgh). Its topmost branches are home to rare

and elusive white-letter hairstreak butterflies, which only live in mature elm trees. Saplings are a lovely and hopeful thing, but they are no Chelsea Road Elms.

It is said that the UK has more veteran and ancient trees than any country in Europe, yet they have minimal protection, a fact finally acknowledged by the Government in July this year in its Revised National Planning Policy Framework. Hopefully this will mark a change in attitude among the more chainsaw-happy councils. Tree Rescue ([treerescue.org.uk](http://treerescue.org.uk)) is a project



that aims to change hearts and minds. Set up by sponsors Carbon Gold and Apex Tree Surgeons, this winter it will treat five veteran trees chosen by the public, for free, to show that treatment is more effective and cheaper than replacement.

Martin Saxon, project lead, counters the argument that saplings are easier to look after than older trees: 'We want to get the message across that diseased and even dying trees can be rescued. The argument for chopping them down is usually wrong. If a tree is in decline, more often than not it is a problem in the soil, whether it's compaction or disease or lack of nutrients.' Chopping it down and replacing it is a waste of money because the next tree will encounter the same problems.

Tree Rescue will try an innovative treatment that is used throughout Europe (all of Stockholm's street trees are treated this way) involving a one-off injection, deep into the soil, of biochar enriched with mycorrhizal fungi, which improves the soil's water-holding capacity and provides the perfect housing for micro-organisms that promote tree-root health.

The treatment has successfully revitalised the Bexley Charter Oak at Danson Park, southeast London, and the Totteridge Yew in North London, a contender for Europe's oldest tree at 2,000 years old. Wouldn't it be wonderful if it became the norm for our veteran trees to be given such respect and such life-sustaining treatment, rather than all that grandeur, beauty and wildlife value being turned to woodchips at the first sign of trouble? ●

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