

Trees in the City Provide Learning Opportunities

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Nova Scotia's total land area is classified as about three-quarters wooded, exceeded in proportion only by New Brunswick among Canadian provinces. Given the importance of trees to the landscape of Nova Scotia, one might expect that our citizens should know a fair amount about forests and trees and their roles in the environmental, economic, and social fabrics of our province. One could hope!

As a professor of resource and environmental studies for more than three decades (until recently), I was repeatedly shocked at how little our students understood about trees and forests, even the students who grew up in the wooded countryside. However, I too grew up in well-wooded agricultural landscapes in rural Ontario, and neither did I know much about trees until my summer jobs took me away from the hayfields and into the woods. Employments such as urban tree care and forest-fire-fighting in northern Ontario provided the beginnings of my lifelong learning experiences with trees and forests.

Approaches to learning are diverse indeed, especially formal learning – we observe, we read, we talk, we listen, we watch videos, we think, we write. I'm a true believer in the power of experiential learning where we engage with the very objects we are trying to learn about. Experiential learning is especially powerful in the context of nature – the more learning time we spend WITH the objects of nature we are interested in learning about, the more profound our learning experiences can be.

That is essentially what is behind the Forest School movement worldwide. The website of Forest School Canada (<https://childnature.ca/forest-school-canada/>) says that "Our goal is for all children in Canada to have the opportunity to lead their play and learning on the Land as an integral part of their education and healthy development." A few years back I read Richard Louv's bestselling book "The Nature Principle: Reconnecting with Life in a Virtual Age" and was profoundly influenced by what I read about the power of nature-based education.

Early in my career as a professor, my focus was on trees in the countryside – woodlots and vast hinterland forests. I spent as much time as I could with colleagues and students out in the woods to observe forest ecosystems and how they are managed and mismanaged. There seemed to be no obstacles, really, to getting out of the city and into the rural forests for field trips and learning exercises of various kinds.

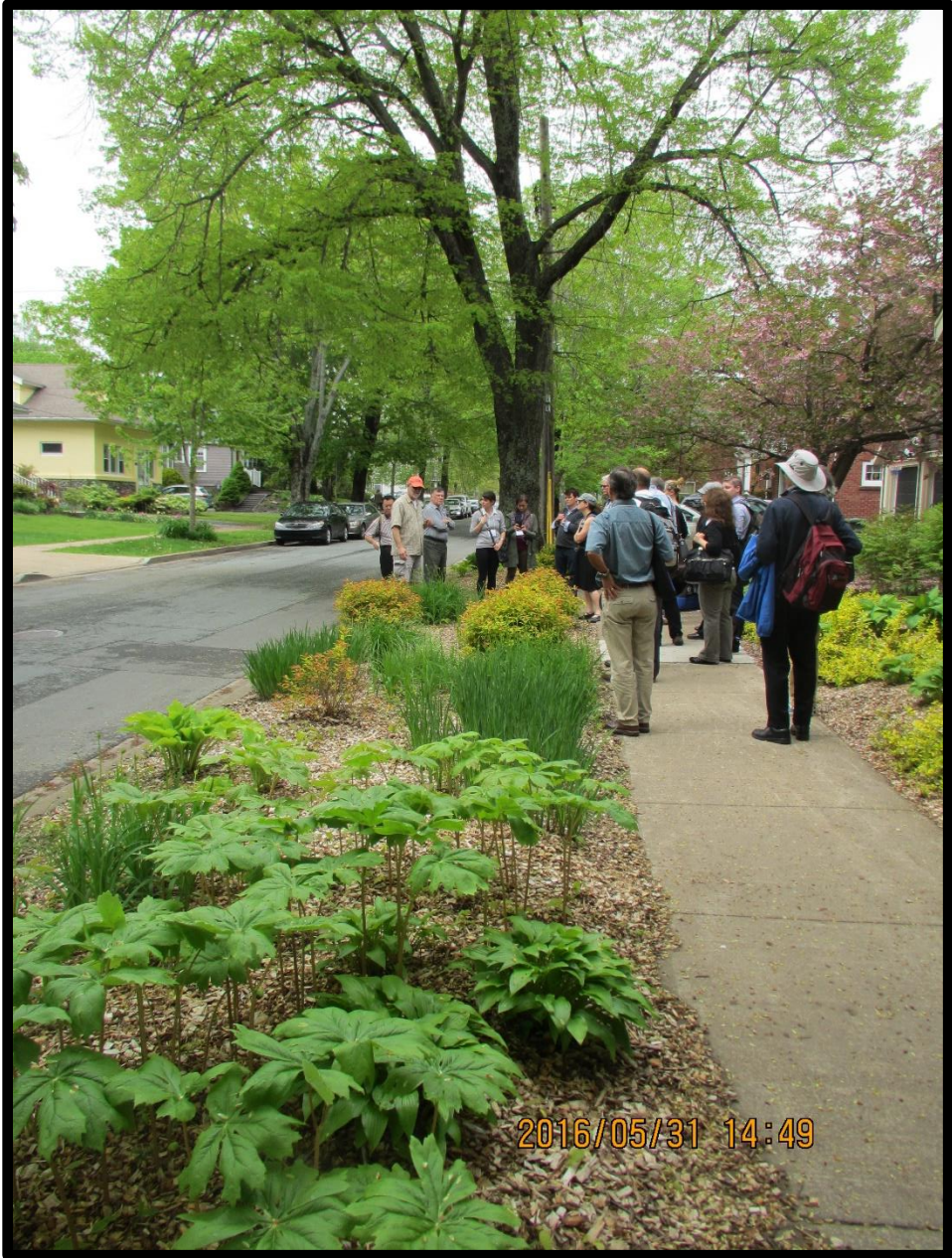
I continue to want this kind of experience in my retirement but I am increasingly appreciating the vast learning opportunities given to me – and all city residents and visitors – by trees in the city. A white pine is a white pine whether it is in the city or in the countryside. Same with every other tree species native to Nova Scotia. If the learning is about tree species and their botanical characteristics, we can learn about all 42 Nova Scotian tree species right here in the city

because they all exist here! We can also learn about the hundred-and-fifty-odd tree species not native to Nova Scotia because they have been planted here over the past century or more. All I have to do, and all anybody in the city has to do, is walk around with eyes open – and some kind of tree-identification resource in print or on the mobile phone – and engage in learning about the trees we see and smell and hear and feel. And if one is unable to walk around but rather needs to use mobility assistance, the trees are still highly accessible along the sidewalks of the city. Finally, getting to those trees is really inexpensive and usually requires no fossil fuels – I favour walking and cycling but will take the bus when necessary.

If I decide to leave my home for these learning experiences, I can focus my short travels on the streets of the city, on the Public Gardens, on parks and cemeteries, on institutional properties like the universities. In some of the parks I can learn about semi-natural forest ecosystems and stand structures because the intensity of forest management there is either low or non-existent (e.g. Fleming Park, Hemlock Ravine). But in fact, I don't even have to leave my home in the centre of the Halifax peninsula to be able to examine, up close, the following tree species: American elm, European beech, red spruce, yellow birch, white birch, white pine, red oak, Norway maple, sugar maple, and eastern hemlock. How wonderful is that?

Our educational aim at Halifax Tree Project is this, as the website says: "Among members of our group, we have experience teaching people about trees and urban forests across the entire range of ages - from grade-school classes to university classes. Contact us if you have an idea for an educational event." Our favourite way of engaging citizens in tree learning is what we call urban-forest walkabouts (as you see in the photos). As part of our annual workplan with HRM (under a research agreement at Dal with me as Principal Investigator), we are hoping to run a vigorous schedule of urban-forest walkabouts in summer 2021. They usually last up to two hours, are family-friendly, and focus on trees in a small neighbourhood so the walk is actually quite short. The walkabouts will be advertised as broadly as we can so HRM citizens can readily be aware of our offerings and sign up to participate.





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