



# NEWSLETTER

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER FOR  
OKLAHOMA COMMUNITY FORESTRY COUNCIL

Spring 2026

## 50 Years of Stewardship, 50 Years of Impact!

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This year marks a major milestone for community forestry: the 50th anniversary of Tree City USA, a flagship program of the Arbor Day Foundation. For five decades, Tree City USA has helped communities build stronger urban forests through local commitment—setting standards, investing in trees, and engaging residents in stewardship.

Across Oklahoma, Arbor Day and Arbor Week celebrations are more than ceremonial plant-ings—they're visible reminders that trees are infrastructure. They cool neighborhoods, reduce stormwater runoff, support public health, strengthen property values, and make our towns and cities more livable. Every time a city plants trees in the right place, maintains saplings, protects mature canopy, or educates residents, that work compounds year after year.

Oklahoma's Tree City USA communities, Tree Campuses, and Tree Line USA utilities represent a statewide network of leaders who are putting that long-term mindset into practice. None of this happens by accident. It takes volunteers, city staff, campus partners, crews, boards, and engaged residents choosing, consistently, to care for the public landscape. In Oklahoma, those choices have led to over \$10 million dollars of investment and 1.8 million residents impacted.

As we celebrate Arbor Day/Week this season, let's recognize what 50 years of participation really means: thousands of local decisions that added up to measurable, lasting impact. Thank you to every community and partner helping grow Oklahoma's urban forests—one tree, one project, and one season at a time.



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# Tree Spotlight:

## Eastern Cottonwood, *Populus deltoides*

By: Caitlin Gipson, OK State University

*Ah choo!* While some claim this tree is a risk to their health during allergy season, it's still a great option for our often-unforgiving Oklahoma climate. Native to all 77 counties, this "pioneer of the prairie" is fast growing, beautiful, and hardy. Cottonwoods can be long lived (+100yrs) if planted well and can provide quick, expansive shade. In good conditions young trees grow 10-20' annually and can reach at least 65' at maturity, with a typical canopy spread of 50-75'.

This deciduous tree offers year-round visual interest with its deeply furrowed gray bark and large, triangular, bright green spring/summer foliage that tuns yellow in the fall. Additionally, the foliage produces a beautiful fluttering sound in a slight breeze. Conveniently for tree stewards, Cottonwoods require extremely little maintenance, needing next to no pruning and supplemental water only through post-planting root establishment.

If you're still not convinced that Cottonwood is right for you, please note that there are hybrid, male 'cottonless' options in the market such as the 'Soixland' or 'Noreaster' varieties. As well as narrow grow varieties, such as 'Straight Plains'.



**Caption: Eastern Cottonwood (*P. deltoides*) in winter glory.  
OSU Stillwater Campus. DBH: 71", Height: 69.5', Crown Width NS: 87", EW: 63".**

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# From Plains to Forest – A Park Transformation in Progress

By: Elizabeth Bland-Corbishley, OK Forestry Services

In an unassuming town of under 1,500 about 100 miles south southwest of Oklahoma City, several newly planted trees wait with swelling buds to provide shade where there's been sun daily for years. Last year, the city of Comanche, Oklahoma received the Match-Waived Grant from Oklahoma Forestry Services and their project began to plant trees around the city. Two parks were selected for their project: Jackson Park and Kinder Park. Jackson Park, located off State Highway 81, welcomes all who drive through Comanche. The legendary Chisholm Trail once passed through the area; little evidence of the trail remains visible, but the small creek with historic cottonwoods in Jackson Park are reminiscent of the days when cattle roamed this mixed-grass prairie. Meanwhile, Kinder Park is a neighborhood park right next door to the City's Housing Authority. It hosts a splash pad, swings, picnic tables, a playground, and a basketball court.

Through this grant, Comanche's City Manager and facilities crew are working to transform these areas from sun-baked prairie to a shaded and lush recreational area. With grant funds, they have acquired training on proper tree planting practices and purchased 22 trees to plant in the two parks. In 20 years, Kinder Park will be unrecognizable, where Comanche crews planted 14 hardwood trees, including Kentucky coffeetrees, bur oaks, and improved pecans (a local favorite). In time, these trees will grow to help mitigate heat, provide fruit and nuts for the public, and improve aesthetics and air quality. While it will take some time before harvest season, I hope to visit Comanche again to enjoy fresh pecans from these grant provided trees.



Jackson Park with large cottonwoods and elms in the background



Kinder Park, *before tree planting*



Kinder Park, *after tree planting*

# Greenwood's Silent Witness: The Legacy of a Living Archive

By: Riley Coy, OK Forestry Services

For 121 years, an American elm has stood as a silent sentinel while history unfolded beneath her branches. For the first half of her life, she grew under the shadow of a larger neighbor, developing a heavy westward lean as she reached for the evening sun. She endured, outlasting her competitor to watch the Greenwood District of Tulsa rise, thrive, and flourish. She sheltered families during Sunday picnics and watched children grow into the leaders of a legendary community.

She was there in June of 1921.

In the early morning hours of June 1st, her slumber was shattered. The pre-dawn sky ignited with an unnatural orange glow; the rising sun was blotted out by columns of thick, oily smoke as the "Black Wall Street" of America burned. In the days, months, and years that followed, her landscape changed dramatically, scarred by fire and silence. Still, she endured.

The families who eventually returned to her shade were different. Fractured and scarred, yet fueled by a defiant tenacity. The elm observed as the community rebuilt from the ashes, and she bore witness again decades later as highways were carved through the heart of the district. Through every era of injustice, denial, and rebirth, she remained, recording the unvarnished truth within the steady growth of her rings.

Today, this American elm stands near the sidewalk on Greenwood Avenue in the yard of George Washington Carver Middle School. Through a grant from National Geographic, the Black Heritage Tree Project collective is working to identify and preserve trees like this one in historically significant areas across the country and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Efforts to recognize, protect, and preserve the Greenwood Legacy Tree are a collaborative labor of love. The Black Heritage Tree Project has joined forces with Up With Trees, Tulsa Public Schools, BP Trees, Oklahoma Forestry Services, and the broader arboriculture community to ensure this witness survives for another century.

These trees are more than just canopy; they are living archives of Black history. Some are Witness Trees, silent observers of loss and resistance. Others are Spirit Trees, providing hallowed ground for ancestral reconnection and protection.

The story of the Greenwood Legacy Tree is still being written. If you know of a tree with a story to tell, please reach out to the Black Heritage Tree Project to help put your tree on the map. For more information, please visit [www.blackheritagetrees.com](http://www.blackheritagetrees.com).



## CONTACT US

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**OKLAHOMA COMMUNITY  
FORESTRY COUNCIL**

## DATES TO REMEMBER

Arbor Week

March 24 - 29, 2026