

Adopt A Tree "How To" (March 2011)

HOW TO START YOUR OWN ADOPT-A-TREE-PROGRAM

by Friends of Trinity Bellwoods Park, Toronto, Canada

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HOW TO START YOUR OWN ADOPT-A-TREE PROGRAM

An Adopt-A-Tree program can take many forms but one that has become a model for others in Toronto was started by the Friends of Trinity Bellwoods Park in 2006. It is a community-initiated and entirely volunteer-run program in which individual neighbors of the park agree to 'adopt' and take care of a newly transplanted sapling tree for its first four years. They take responsibility for weekly watering during the summer (when there's been a shortage of rain), mulching in the spring and keeping the base of the tree free of weeds. It's a wonderfully simple community-run activity that can (and has) been applied in other city parks as well as for street tree plantings.

The FoTBP's program grew organically when neighbors of the park noticed newly planted saplings were dying for lack of regular watering. They realised city staff were often stretched too thin to maintain sufficient watering in the young trees' first years and just started carrying buckets of water into the park. The next time the city did a planting of trees, they got organised so they could cover each other during vacation times, started a mailing list and approached the Parks department for assistance with water outlets. They currently have over 60 volunteers watering, weeding and annually mulching some 90 sapling trees in the park.

Newly replanted sapling trees take three to five years to recover and develop a new root system deep enough to survive during periods of little rain. A widely accepted minimum watering standard is 1" (2.5cm) of rain per week or 5 gallons (20 litres) of water. Although in the first year of transplanting and in times of high heat and drought they benefit from more than that. The FoTBP model is one adopter for one tree so it's not a lot of work when shared amongst a group of people – many hands make light work – and makes a huge difference to the survival rate of the trees. Because the volunteers work independently watering their tree it's also an initiative that doesn't require attendance at or the coordination of large meetings.

Volunteer community groups don't have official standing with the Parks Department due largely to potential union issues. But times are changing and, particularly where green spaces are more heavily used and ad-hoc community volunteer activities have increased, there is more interface between Parks and volunteer groups. This means the Parks Department is more familiar with how these groups work and their benefits, and what kind of requests they have. This has made it easier in recent years to get assistance and reduced the level of suspicion from Parks staff. Nevertheless, it is helpful to keep in mind that an initiative like an AAT should *not* create additional work for Parks staff.

The primary benefits of an adopt-a-tree program are pretty straightforward:

- the trees get cared for at a critical and vulnerable point in their development
- the adopters have an investment in the park and the trees
- it saves tax dollars – the cost of the tree's seeding, nursery care and planting is not wasted
- succession shade trees for today's mature, shady giants are ensured for Toronto's future

START YOUR OWN AAT

Anyone can start an adopt a tree program – and it can be big or small, more official or completely guerilla. The key thing is to ensure the young trees get *consistently* watered and cared for and survive to contribute to the park's and the city's green canopy.

Whether there are existing saplings in need of care or you're looking to have new trees planted in your park or neighborhood which you plan to care for, the following can help you launch an adopt-a-tree program for them.

10-POINT CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESS

Assuming that you already have the buy-in from a core group of neighbors (two to five people) who are committed to an adopt-a-tree program, here's what you need to make it work:

1. - the support of your City Councillor
2. - the support of your Park's Supervisor
3. - seasonal water sources not too far from the saplings
4. –one volunteer to be the point person for contact with your Park Supervisor
5. – a simple map of the sapling trees in your program (paper, online)
6. – some modest funds to buy equipment (\$50 to \$400 depending on size of program)
7. – watering equipment such as short hose lengths, bundle buggies, water jugs, locks, chains
8. – an email list of park users and neighbors or some other way of letting them know about the AAT program.
9. – a posse of volunteer adopters, ideally one per sapling tree
10. – a sense of realism about how much you and your group can take on

GETTING SUPPORT FOR YOUR PROGRAM

Contact Your Local Councillor

Most city councillors will be happy to support your efforts – the benefits are unarguable and everyone loves trees. Introduce yourself and your plans by phone or in person. If you don't already have the name and contact number for your Park Supervisor, ask your Councillor to introduce you via email. It is helpful for the Parks department to know you have support. If you don't know who your Councillor is, [here is a list](#) with contact numbers.

If you don't already have an email list of your park's users and neighbors, your Councillor may be able to do a mailing for you or include mention of the program with your contact information in one of their regular eBulletins.

Contact Your Park Supervisor

Our city parks usually have at least one water outlet and many still have the remnants of old irrigation systems from the days when Toronto watered the grass in its parks but for safety and theft reasons they are locked. The critical thing you need from the Parks, Forestry & Recreation Department is access to that water source and for that you need to have the Park's Supervisor on-board.

Most Park Supervisors are by now familiar with volunteer activities like an AAT, but keep in mind that they have a job to do and staff to run and minding a group of volunteers is not part of it. The intent of a program like an AAT is not to create more work for Parks' staff but to enhance it.

Having your Park Supervisor on-board can also bring assistance like a free pile of mulch in the spring for your volunteers to spread around the trees, or getting another tree planted if vandals damage or destroy an existing one. Although it is possible to run an AAT program in a park without parks staff, the staff are such a great resource of information it doesn't really make much sense to do it without them.

Optimally you will be able to meet your Park Supervisor and walk through the park to discuss the program, where the water sources are, who to contact in case the water source is turned off, etc. You can talk at that time about the best way and times to be in touch with him or her, etc. Make it easy for them.

If you're unsure who your Park Supervisor is, the City of Toronto publishes [a pdf list](#) of all the staff of the Parks, Forestry & Recreation Departments which is fairly regularly updated. The staff list gives insight into how the department is organised -- your park's Supervisor and staff, for instance, have responsibility for a number of parks and green spaces in the area, not just your park. Their schedules take them to many different locations in a week.

If you need Trees

If you are looking to have trees planted which you will take care of, it is the Urban Forestry department that should be contacted. Your Park Supervisor or City Councillor can assist in putting you in touch with them.

Urban Forestry is a separate department within Parks, Forestry and Recreation. They maintain nurseries and also have contracts with private nurseries to meet the needs of our city street and park plantings. Urban Forestry also has contracts with different companies for the *planting* of trees in our parks. Saplings are generally planted in the spring or the fall and are provided with an initial mulching at that time.

The trees are usually available without a fee because a planting you request can generally be fit within the department's own, annual planting plans and budget. The city of Toronto has set targets to greatly increase and restore the tree canopy in our city, so almost anywhere you can spot a need for more trees, they would likely find agreeable. However, they are working within tight budgets and you may have to wait.

If you have a group of existing saplings in your sights, the Urban Forestry department can probably tell you what kind of trees they are. They create planting diagrams with tree-type notations for the contractors who plant them and should be able to send you a copy.

A word of caution about the number of trees to include in your adopt-a-tree program. Finding sufficient volunteers takes time – sometimes a lot of time. You are better off starting with a modest number – say 25 trees and building the program with more trees in subsequent years. It's better to have a few adopters-in-waiting than stressed and dying saplings.

GETTING PREPARED – THE NUTS & BOLTS

Running a volunteer AAT program can be as much or as little work as you are prepared to put in to it really, and each group will find its own level of organisation and methods of implementation that work for its own unique situation. That said, there's little reason to re-invent the wheel and in that spirit the following suggestions come from the FoTBP and other groups which have started their own AAT programs.

The initial setup will require more work than the weekly running of it.

1. An Organising Group or Coordinator and Point Person

Whether the administrative work is taken on by one person or split amongst a number of people it is useful to have *one* person who is the sole point-person for the Park's Supervisor. It confuses matters if the Park Supervisor is getting messages from more than one person about any problems with water sources, etc. If one person from your group is the contact person then a rapport and trust is established over time as well. It is worth repeating that a volunteer program in the parks is counterproductive if it creates *more* work for the Park's staff.

It can also be useful to have a coordinator who manages the annual checklist to ensure that everything is in place, and who is a point-person for the adopters if they have questions or problems. However, if you are working with more than one water source it spreads the workload to have a designated Water Captain for each water source who will monitor to ensure it's working. If there are problems, word can be passed up to your Parks point-person and on to the Park's Supervisor. Likewise, if you end up with a large number of trees (anything over 25 or 30) splitting the park into quadrants or rows and sharing responsibility for adopter care between members of your core group might be useful. The point here is to acknowledge the workload involved and be realistic about how much any of you can handle. It's not useful – or fun – to take something on and fail.

The organising committee/group or program coordinator's essential responsibilities are:

1. liaison with the Park Supervisor
2. monitoring and ensuring a consistent water source
3. acquiring and installing watering equipment (buggies, water jugs, etc)
4. finding and maintaining volunteers (annual emails to confirm volunteers are still on-board)
5. organising delivery of a large pile of mulch each spring for adopters' to use on their trees
6. assisting adopters find holiday subs to ensure ongoing care (optional) *
7. contacting Urban Forestry for replacements if saplings are vandalised (optional) *

* Some AAT groups leave this to the individual adopters

2. Funds

The costs of an AAT using this model are very modest because it is entirely run by volunteers and because the water source(s) and annual mulch needs can be provided by the Parks Department. The watering equipment (buggies, jugs, locks, etc) will likely run in the less than \$100 to possibly \$400 range depending on the number of water sources that need to be equipped.

The FoTBP's AAT modest program costs are covered by the Friends organisation which has been around for many years and undertakes its own fundraising initiatives. A new AAT group at Woodbine Park established a \$10 annual donation from each adopter to cover their costs. Equipment could be donated by the local business or the adopters themselves. An alternative is to ask park neighbors for donations of used buggies and hoses, etc.

3. Map and Master List of the Trees

Draw a simple map or print off a google map, mark where the trees are and give them numbers. This makes it easy to assign and keep track of the trees and adopters. Having a paper map to carry when you're in the park looking for the trees is a very helpful reference. It's also helpful to give a small photocopy of the map to each adopter with their tree highlighted.

An online Google map can be immensely useful tool too and is fairly simple to create. (If you keep the editing ability to one or two people but make the map public you will avoid trees suddenly moving about.) Mark all the trees on your map (they don't have to be exact, eyeballing is fine). Differentiate the ones that are adopted and not adopted with different icons so it is easy to identify which trees still need adopters. A link to the map can easily be sent to potential adopters -- or to confirmed adopters who may forget where their tree is.



Create a Master List of the numbered trees which notes the year they were planted, along with the adopter's name, email, and phone number – the excel program is great for this. The list will help you keep track of how many more years the sapling will be in the program. The list will also be used every spring to check in with the adopters to ensure they are still living in the neighborhood and on-board for another season.

Tree #	Tree Type	Year Planted	Adopter Name(s)	Contact Email	Confirmed for this yr?	Notes

If you're interested in what type of tree it is, you may be able to find this out from Urban Forestry (see note above). You will probably find that adopters want to know what type of tree they are taking care of.

3. Watering Equipment

The cost of the equipment will be very modest and range from less than \$100 to \$400 depending on how many water outlets you are equipping.

Keeping all your equipment simple and inexpensive will keep temptation down for thieves. We're not fans of creating more garbage, but the shorter lifespan of inexpensive equipment more than pays for the heartbreak of the theft of a fancy (pricey) wagon or hose.

Bundle buggies - approx \$25 - water is heavy and having buggies makes it that much easier for a volunteer to get out there and do their part. The easier it is to do, the more often a volunteer will participate. The small buggies fit two 10L jugs neatly. More than 25 litres and the buggy will break under the weight.



Once the jugs are filled and at the tree the whole buggy can be tipped over to deploy the water.



Water jugs - most supermarkets sell water in rectangular 10L plastic jugs. Their shape makes them a perfect fit for two to sit side by side in a small bundle buggy. The 10L jugs also fit neatly into bicycle baskets. By a nice coincidence 20 Litres (5 gallons) is the recommended weekly watering for a sapling. Use a waterproof magic marker and label them so passers-by and adopters alike know what they're for. Include the capacity of the jugs so adopters know how much they're watering their tree.



Combo locks & Chain – locks \$7, chain \$10 - theft is a fact of life in a public place – lock down the buggies near the water source. A simple combination lock and a length of heavy chain will work most of the time. A combination lock means no keys need to be distributed and access information can be given by email or phone. The locks will likely have to be replaced every season as rain and use makes them rusty but they are not expensive.



Rubber hose with a shut-off lever - \$7 to \$15 - to attach to the Parks water supply. The city's parks water controls are usually behind locked doors so the water supply for your use will be constantly on. You will therefore need a shut-off valve on your hose. Sometimes the tap outlet for the hose is ½" and sometimes larger – make sure to measure. Don't get expensive hoses or toggles as they are more likely to get stolen. A short length of hose (3 feet or a 1 metre) should be sufficient for transferring water from the outlet to a water jug. Longer than that will require more work to recoil and keep neat.



A word about minding the water source. It is a very valid source of concern for Parks staff that an open water source can be abused – it can be left running and quickly waste mega-gallons of good water. Make a point of asking the adopters to keep an eye out for this and to turn it off where they can and to let one of your coordinators know right away if they see this happening. Your only other alternative is to find a water source behind a locked door and give keys to all your adopters. This can be tricky to negotiate if the locked space is a park storage or maintenance building. In Trinity Bellwoods Park they are fortunate to have a community greenhouse with a water source so access is not a problem.

4. AAT Instruction Sheet for Adopters

Create a one-page "How To" and Welcome sheet for the volunteers which gives them basic reminders of what you'll tell them when you introduce them to their tree, and contact information. FoTBP has provided a sample [here](#). Feel free to adapt to your own needs.

5. Mulching

Mulch – shredded trees – will compost back in to the soil within a season so the young trees will need an annual application to help slow water evaporation, keep weeds down and discourage damage by week-whackers. (Grey plastic tree guards can also really help in the latter regard.) Mulch can usually be provided by the Parks Department as they are regularly trimming branches and taking down damaged trees, etc. With a few week's notice a large pile can be dropped in an area handy for the adopters.

If you have a set day and time for the mulching the Parks Department has also been known to lend shovels and wheelbarrows. It is advisable to work fast once a mulch pile is provided because gardening neighbors tend to emerge with wheelbarrows and spirit it off to their own gardens. It is a public pile after all.

There's a right and wrong way to mulch. LEAF's Tree Care Guide provides a useful ["how to"](#) – and is a terrific general resource for all things tree.

FINDING AND SUPPORTING THE VOLUNTEER ADOPTERS

What is needed from the Adopters

Be clear what you're asking a volunteer adopter to do. It is a wonderfully simple and extremely effective program but only if everyone pitches in and does what they say they're going to. It's best if they know beforehand how much time and effort is involved. If someone is hesitant about the commitment, you could offer to give their name as a 'babysitter' while a regular adopter is on vacation – this gives them an opportunity to try it out. But otherwise, the point of the program is to have fully committed volunteer adopters providing full-time care.

In this AAT program model, each sapling tree is adopted by a specific individual(s) who agrees to tend the young tree for four years as it develops a root system mature enough to survive on its own.

The adopter's responsibility is:

- an annual mulching around the tree's base.
- keeping the base of the tree free of weeds so i) there is no competition for water, and ii) to avoid their tender bark being hit by well-meaning weed-whackers.
- ensuring the sapling receives 5 gallons of water when there hasn't been a minimum of 1" of rain per 7-days (**best applied in one deep watering rather than many shallow ones to avoid shallow root growth**)
- finding a 'babysitter' when they are going to be out of town for more than 6 or 7 days.

Toronto has experienced more summers of drought recently than not, so it is generally best-practice for adopters to simply make a weekly watering-date with the sapling in order to ensure its water needs are met. It is difficult (but not impossible) to over-water the sapling and in times of high heat and drought, especially in the first year of transplanting, watering more than once a week is optimal. For more details on sapling care, the [LEAF](#) site is an incredible resource.

Finding a babysitter becomes crucial during the hottest summer months. If the adopter doesn't have a friend who can cover for them, adopter tree-neighbors can often be approached to swap some watering for when they go on holiday. The AAT coordinator or group can provide the contact information for tree-neighbors if they haven't met.

Getting the word out

In addition to a park's immediate neighbors, there are many different regular user groups of any park. Reach out to all of them – parents with young children, dog owners, joggers, strollers, etc. All of them have a stake in the park's well-being and the simple act of caring for a tree can be an appealing way to give-back. Sometimes a group of people – neighbors or a nursery school – will adopt a tree together.

There are a number of different ways to get the message out to potential volunteer adopters.

In Trinity Bellwoods Park the Friends group organises an annual Spring Park Day where, amongst other activities, a table is set up with information about the Adopt A Tree program with a sign-up sheet. The Friends of Woodbine Park set up a table at the Police Week Community Fair in their neighborhood. If your park has a Recreation Centre a notice can be put on their public bulletin board. Contact the other community groups that use the Recreation Centre's meeting rooms and ask about making announcements through them.

If you don't have an email list of neighbors of the park already, your local Councillor may be able to help by including a mention with a contact email or number in their regular constituency eNewsletters. Your Councillor might have room for an information table for you at one of their neighborhood events. If there is a local neighborhood ratepayers association they are also usually amenable to including mentions in their newsletters. Notices on lamp-posts and at the local Library can also help. If there is a local community newspaper they can be approached to write a notice or article about the program to help promote it.

Once you have a group of adopters, they can be oriented to their tasks at the moment they sign on if it's during a Park Day, or a program volunteer can individually meet the adopters – or group of adopters -- as they sign on.

The original orientation meeting with an adopter should include:

- a reminder about why the program was started and that it's run by volunteers – like themselves
- an information sheet, and perhaps a map with their tree (and tree type, year it was planted) marked
- an outline of the tree care responsibilities
 - watering ("keep an eye on the sky" for rain)
 - weeding
 - an annual mulch
- remind them to find a 'babysitter' to water if they are away for more than 6 or 7 days.
- let them know who to contact if they find the water source isn't working, or anything's broken or missing or there has been damage to their tree

Ongoing contact with Adopters/Annual Calendar checklist

Mid-spring - contact the adopters every spring. It's not unusual that a few will have moved out of the immediate neighborhood, or their life situation has changed so they are unable to continue their commitment. It's best to check with everyone to confirm their ongoing participation in order to avoid a situation where a sapling is forgotten.

Late-spring – contact the Park Supervisor to find out when the water will be turned on
- set a date in May or early June for the annual mulching of the trees and contact the Park Supervisor to see about getting a pile of mulch delivered. It's best to do the mulching at the beginning of the season before the grass cutters and weed-whackers start their work.

Late-May or early June (depending on weather) – deploy watering equipment and alert the adopters the season has started

Summer season – the adopters work independently, keeping an eye on the rainfall but if someone in the group is up for it, an email alert to everyone when there's been more than 7 days without sufficient rainfall can be a helpful nudge.

Late Fall (depending on weather) – the water in the parks is usually turned off by the end of October and by then the weather is usually covering the water needs of the saplings. Let the adopters know that the season is over, perhaps give them a bit of a report on how the season went. Since the adopters work independently a season wrap-up with news and, of course, a thank you, is a nice reminder of how it is through the small contribution of each of them that so much is accomplished.

WHAT CAN GO WRONG

As long as the participants are active, an AAT program using this model fortunately has few things that can go wrong, but they occasionally do.

- water source stops working – the water sources you are using are likely to be used by Parks staff and/or other city staff such as nearby street or TTC construction crews. They may not know you are using it and turn it off when they are finished. In some cases the water may be turned off further 'upstream.' Or park staff may have found the water left on and turned off the water at source. You may never know what happened. Contact your Park Supervisor and keep in mind that it may take a day or two to get reconnected or turned back on.
- vandalism – it's a fact of life that vandalism happens in public spaces and unfortunately trees do not escape this kind of attention. Sapling trees have been kicked to pulp, had their bark peeled (which slowly kills the tree, see LEAF's description), or simply been sawed down. Let your Park Supervisor know. In most cases Urban Forestry can replace the sapling the following spring or fall when they have another round of planting planned.
- a tree shows signs of bad-health or dies – for various reasons some trees do not transplant well (the long tap root of Shagbark Hickory, for instance, is hard to move without damaging it) and trees, like the rest of us, are vulnerable to bugs, fungus and disease. Let your Park Supervisor and Urban Forestry know – sending closeup photos of bugs or leaf damage is helpful – and if the tree doesn't survive, they can usually replace it the next time a planting in the area is done.
- people don't water their tree –there's little you can do about that, except find another volunteer and gently tell the original adopter they're off the hook.

A GOOD IDEA KEEPS ON GROWING

Good luck with your adopt-a-tree initiative and don't forget to share your story and experiences. Thanks to the Friends groups at Woodbine Park, Withrow Park and McCormick Park for sharing their experience and ideas.

<http://www.trinitybellwoods.ca/adopt-a-tree/about-aat.html>

<http://christiepits.ca/about/aboutus.asp>

<http://friendsofwithrowpark.blogspot.ca/2011/09/adopt-tree.html>

<http://www.mccormickpark.ca/adopt-a-tree/>

<http://www.yourleaf.org/junction-depave-paradise>

<http://www.yourleaf.org/blog/helen-godfrey/2012-08-23/keeping-bayview-buckets>