

ROADSIDE TREES

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The origins of the first town and village trees are obscure. Perhaps a few were remnants of natural forests which were caught up in the spread of the streets but probably most of them were the result of deliberate planting. We know that the fashion of formal lines of evenly spaced trees bordering private avenues was popular in France and other continental countries during the seventeenth century and it seems likely that it was brought to England by Le Notre who was employed by Charles I in improving the royal estates. Certain it is that the lime was introduced by Le Notre and that from his coming to England date many of the famous avenues of this tree which was already common in such formal plantings in France. It seems likely that the first avenues planted were those on private ground as part of the geometrical patterns of the parks and gardens of the period and that they were later extended to embrace the roads approaching the mansions and the streets of the neighbouring villages. From this to town planting by the municipal authority was a natural step and nowadays roadside trees are considered an essential part of the decorative scheme of all important cities.

The fashion in landscape gardening has changed greatly since the days of Charles I and Le Notre and the straight and regular avenues of that time were less and less planted and gave way in the following century to the curving drives through tree dotted parks which are now a feature of nearly all demesnes in Ireland. Only along public thoroughfares did formality persist. In the nature of things curves and groves were not feasible in such places and the style, and to a great extent the species, employed three hundred years ago by the French gardeners are still used in schemes of roadside planting.

It is accepted by all that trees of the right kind can be a feature of great beauty in towns and that they do much to brighten the lives of the inhabitants by reminding them of the green countryside which lies beyond the pavements. The soft outlines of trees tone down the sharp angles of the buildings and their restful colours are a relief from the harsh glare of stone and metal. In the country, too, roadside trees are an attractive feature at all seasons and planting will in a few years beautify stretches of newly made roads which, without trees, would remain stark and ugly for a long time.

Although all are agreed about the desirability of trees in public places, the way of the roadside planter is not an easy one. He has

many people to please and many problems to solve in the course of his work and is subject to much criticism, often of an uninformed kind. His critics are inclined to overlook the paramount purpose of streets and roads; that is to act as thoroughfares for the easy passage of vehicles. Trees must take second place to traffic, to lighting and to the convenience of those who use the streets or who live in the buildings adjoining. In these interests it is sometimes impossible to plant at all or changing times make necessary the severe lopping or total removal of trees which have become too large for their positions. The widespread use of overhead wires for telephones and electric transmission and the tendency for lorries and buses to get larger and larger make the task of the roadside tree cultivator yearly more difficult and call for ever more skill in the selection and placing of new trees and the treatment of old.

The conditions for tree growth along roads, and especially in town streets, as can be imagined, are not ideal. Often the soil is extremely poor, due to excavation or filling for the purpose of levelling the surface at the time of construction. In such cases a large pit must be opened and refilled with good soil brought from outside. Lack of soil aeration and drought are common impediments to health. Both are caused by the impervious surface of road and footpath which surround the tree and effectively cut off the percolation of rain water to the roots. This evil can be mitigated by retaining a patch of open soil around the base of each tree and by artificial watering during lengthy periods of dry weather.

The subject of vandalism is a sore one with all who have charge of trees in public places. Bark is damaged, branches torn and even heads of trees pulled off by thoughtless persons who in a short time utterly destroy the work of years. Metal tree guards are some protection against such wilful destruction but the only sure cure is the spread of a spirit of civic pride and responsibility. To be effective this must start in the schools so that children may learn to respect communal property such as street trees.

In many up-to-date cities there is a special staff of skilled men to care the trees in the streets and parks. Their wages are a charge on the rates and each year a plan of planting, tending, pruning and other necessary work is budgeted for. Trees need unremitting care if they are to thrive and become objects of beauty. They must be trained and pruned to a symmetrical shape in keeping with their artificial environment to avoid the brutal lopping which is the fruit of years of neglect. Stakes and ties need regular inspection and adjustments to prevent damage to the bark by rubbing. Cultivation of the soil around the stem and the addition of leaf mould, bone meal and lime may be necessary to keep trees in health and watering may be called for in dry summers especially with newly planted specimens.

The aim of the Irish Roadside Tree Association is to direct attention to the need for such maintenance of existing trees in our

towns and cities and to encourage further plantings in streets, parks and along suburban and rural roads. A departure from many established customs is desirable. Geometrical exactness may be demanded in the placing of specimens in city streets but it is hardly essential in the spacious surroundings of the suburbs and the country where a natural treatment may be more effective. Large growing species like London Plane, English Elm and Horse Chestnut are out of place in narrow streets as their spreading boughs soon become a nuisance. For any except the most open spaces where a tree can be allowed to attain its normal size, or something approaching thereto, trees of smaller habit and with compact narrow crowns are to be preferred. Fortunately they are numerous. Whitebeam, Sorbus, Mountain Ash, Birch, Ginkgo, Hawthorn, Flowering Cherry and Pyrus, Almond and Ailanthus may be mentioned. All are ornamental and capable of growth under difficult conditions and none reach a stature likely to prove an embarrassment to traffic or other street interests.

Road widening and improving and the construction of new roads can provide opportunities for ornamental planting. A wide road gives scope for ambitious schemes. It is possible to set aside a strip between roadway and footpath where root and branch will have room to grow and spread unhindered. Centre planting on a series of islands may be adopted. Groups may be planted on odd pieces of ground left unused as a result of straightening or easing bends and, where an extensive scheme is contemplated, special species of distinct shape such as Lombardy Poplar may be planted to denote road junctions and such like.

The main points in successful roadside tree planting are selection of the right species, proper planting and maintenance and continued protection.
