

The Outsider's Eye: French Veterans

By Jerry Bond

Like a lot of others involved in arboriculture and urban forestry, I imagine, I spend a lot of time looking at trees and practices when I travel to a different region or country. It never ceases to interest me to see what grows where, and how people manage the trees. And because what I find is often different from what I am used to, it makes me reflect on what I take for granted in my daily work.

With that in mind, I thought it might be interesting to show a few trees that really made me stop, admire, and think during trips to France the last couple of years. The trees are all veterans, in one sense or another, and raise for me intriguing questions about resilience and maintenance.

Veteran tree: "A tree which, because of its great age, size, or condition, is of exceptional cultural, landscape, or nature conservation value." (Wikipedia)

#1: Common ("English") Oak

This common, pedunculate or English oak (*Quercus robur*) made an arresting picture as I drifted by with some friends early one morning, heading downstream on the Sarthe River toward Orléans. I'm just guessing at the ID, of course, since a few hundred feet and a body of water separated me from it, but it appears to be the most likely native oak to find on this wet site.

In addition to gorgeous saturated colors of late September, the tree presents an image of a mortal struggle. The upper left quadrant of the crown displays older dieback of the top central leader, along with "dying back" on big leaders and limbs in the rest of that quadrant, where the color and size of the attached leaves indicate it just lost a big battle. It seems likely from a distance that the tree has advancing root and/or butt decay, perhaps from a pathogen such as shoestring rot (*Armillaria* spp.).

There was no target visible . . . until we floated around the bend and I saw all the cows lying under the trees. Milking cows are costly to replace, so the consequences of their loss is substantial! I was reminded once again that the arborist's opinion of target significance and value is frequently less important than he or she tends to believe.





#2: Black Locust

This black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) in the Square René Viviani on the Left Bank of Paris is considered the oldest tree in the city. It is said to have started from seed in 1601 by Jean Robin (1550–1629), “the king’s gardener,” whose name Linnaeus later was adopted for the botanical designation we know today (Vidos 2009). I found my way to it thanks to a suggestion from an old friend who lived near Bastille.

The tree lost its upper crown to a shell during World War I, the main trunk is hollowed out, and it leans 30 degrees off vertical. But it continues to thrive. My picture shows on the left a huge invasion of ivy up hidden concrete supports and into the crown, as well as vegetative sprouts on the ground; those have since been removed, exposing the heavily leaning trunk and its crutches (inset). Since the tree is apparently unable to stand by itself, it was a good reminder to me of the necessity to distinguish between health (i.e., Will it live?) and stability (i.e., Will it stand?) when speaking about tree condition.

I have never seen this species on a municipal planting list (though many can be found within official limits in the eastern United States, where I live), but it has been planted throughout Paris in parks and on streets. I’ve since been told that street cultivars such as *Robinia pseudoacacia* ‘monophylla’ are quite common in Europe. Intriguingly, the species’ vegetative aggressiveness could be harnessed here to develop a strong and healthy clone from a root sprout so that the “same” tree could survive for a long time to come.



#3: Atlas Cedar

I called this an Atlas cedar (*Cedrus atlantica*) because of the ascending tips of the branches, but apparently there are no consistent morphological or genetic traits that separate it from Lebanon cedar (*Cedrus libani*) (Savill and Wilson 2015). It grows in a large triangular park in front of the Malicorne City Hall (*Pays de la Loire*), which can be seen in the background.

I was unable to determine the cause or date of the obvious total crown loss (WWII?), but was astonished to see that a true cedar was capable of re-sprouting a complete replacement. I don't see it often enough to know the species profile, but true cedars, like yews, may have dormant growing points in older wood. The good news here is that the substantial aesthetic and environmental benefits produced by such a large crown have been recuperated, including cooling any people sitting on the two benches conveniently placed beneath it.

But about those benches. The sprouts created by the removal of the apical meristem have become enormous leaders 1–2 feet (30–60 cm) in diameter and up to 50 feet (15 m) in height. Their attachment is mechanically suspect because the resulting dogleg creates a "stress raiser," and heart rot decay is indicated by a fruiting body on the central stem (inset), which from a distance resembles chicken of the woods (*Laeiiporus* sp.). Every other large tree visible in a 2012 Google Earth™ image of the square has been removed, and it's interesting to see this snapshot of the drama we often witness between rational and emotional responses to tree management.

I'd love to hear what an arborist experienced with crown restoration would suggest here.





#4: White Willow

I assume that this tree is a white willow (*Salix alba*), a species native to the Pays de la Loire region of France where I saw it in a small riverside park. I had no D-tape with me on this vacation—What was I thinking?!—but estimate the trunk remnant to be around 7 feet (2 m) wide and 9 feet (2.5 m) tall. A dozen, 3–5 inch (8–13 cm) shoots rise straight up from rim of the badly decayed top.

It was over a year before looking again at the tree's impressive girth made me realize that this is not just a case of unique landscape management. I now understand that it is well known as a *saule têtard* ("fatheaded willow"), a remnant of a former coppice-on-a-stick pollarding technique designed for production instead of ornamentation. Like the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, traditional rural "community forestry" sought to establish a reliable supply of shoots for fuel, construction, tools, food, and other needs as population growth and forest destruction increased apace. At one time, literally hundreds of shoots must have been harvested every five years or so from this tree, judging from historical images. But now it appears the tree has just about exhausted its carbohydrate reserves, so I guess it will end its life as a good landscape management option after all.

Additional Reading

Green Belt Movement. <www.greenbeltmovement.org>

Savill, P., and S.M. Wilson. 2015. Cedrus, True Cedars. Silviculture and properties. *Quarterly Journal of Forestry* 109(3):168–173.

Vidos, A. 2009. "Le premier robinier aurait été planté à Paris par Jean Robin en 1601 ou 1602." AKATZ. Accessed 04 February 2018. <www.acacia-robinier.be/Premier_robinier_Paris_Jean_Robin_1601.html>.