

COVER STORY

Lungs of the City

Exploring Indy's Urban Forest

[Jim Walker](#)



Jud Scott, one of Indiana's two registered consulting arborists, led the tour.

From the panoramic view at the memorial for James Whitcomb Riley atop Crown Hill, Indianapolis looks to be one huge forest. An endless green sea in summer, the city is now an orange and red and yellow impressionistic painting of a place where nature and humankind share the space just fine, thank you.

Jud Scott, one of Indiana's two registered consulting arborists, is sitting next to me in his white pickup truck. We've just finished a tour of some of the city's niftiest trees. Scott has a special fondness for city trees. "To me, the urban forest is just as important as any other forest," he says. "This is where people live. It is where we are every day."

Scott tells me how Frederick Olmsted, the man who built New York's Central Park, called it "the lungs of the city." Scott sees the grounds at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Marian College and Crown Hill Cemetery as the lungs of our city. "This is a big, living, breathing segment of town," he says. "It helps keep the air pure, keeps us healthy."

Trees do all kinds of positive things in the city. Scott points to national studies that show urban trees helping reduce soil erosion, water and noise pollution, and even correlating trees with a reduction in crime. "We need to care for them the same way we do city streets and buildings," he says.

Developers, redevelopers and property owners Scott works with in his tree-service business are increasingly realizing the value of trees. "People see that trees have a real market value," Scott says. "They aren't something just in the way. People are really working hard to preserve and conserve trees."

Scott has been one of those people ever since he started his business, Vine & Branch Tree Service, as a high school kid in 1976. The move to working with trees — something he studied in college — was a natural progression from a childhood of spending most of his free time in a nearby woods. "It was my best friend," he says.

After 27 years of caring for them, Scott still loves his trees. It's easy to know this as he steers his big, white pickup truck around the city taking us to see several of his other favorite green friends.



White Oak

Stop One

White oak at Butler University

59 and one-quarter inches in diameter

180-200 years old

Butler University's campus makes a fine place to start the tree tour. This stately white oak looming next to Robertson Hall overlooks the entrance to Holcomb Gardens, one of the city's lovelier green spaces. The gardens were originally designed to beautify the end of the trolley line at what was once the northernmost edge of the city. Scott especially enjoys this white oak because of the way Butler preserved it, building Robertson Hall around the stately tree on the hill. "I like to look at planned communities of trees," Scott says of landscaped areas like Holcomb Gardens. "But planned individual trees like this one are also important." The keys to trees living as long as this white oak are simple: plenty of soil for growing and good luck avoiding lightning strikes.



Sugar Maple

Stop Two

Sugar maple at Indianapolis Museum of Art

28 and one-quarter inches in diameter

75-85 years old

This tree, creating a gorgeous yellow view from IMA's restaurant windows, might have been lost during the museum's expansion project if not for a forward-thinking approach to landscaping. The tall sugar maple stands just north of a large underground parking garage covered in soil and planted with new trees. The maple is surrounded by a stone wall that helped protect it during construction and now adds to the beauty of the historic grounds. "They just did it right," Scott says of IMA's approach to trees. He and his company were part of the project, something for which he's quite proud.

Scott points to tree preservation efforts like the ones at IMA as important in helping Indiana continue its trend of adding trees to the landscape over the last 100 years. In 1917, Scott says, Indiana had a 7 percent tree canopy coverage, leading State Forester Charles Deam to predict that the state would be virtually treeless in 15 years. But Indiana turned it around and has added to its canopy every year over the last several decades. Now we're at 20 percent canopy coverage and counting.



Sugar Maple

Stop Three

Sugar maple at Marian College

47 and one-quarter inches in diameter

125-150 years old

A big sugar maple near the Allison Mansion at Marian College is of special importance, Scott says, because it was likely planted by Jens Jensen, a prominent landscape architect from the Progressive Era. Jensen designed several acres of grounds on the northern end of Marian College for James Allison, an early automotive entrepreneur and founder of the Indianapolis 500. The college's EcoLab — a recently revitalized trail through Allison's grounds — is found behind the mansion. Known for his work on parks and estates in the Chicago area in the early 1900s, Jensen helped create a uniquely Midwestern style of city parks and private gardens known today as the Prairie Style of landscape architecture.



Ginkgo Biloba

Stop Four

Ginko biloba behind WFYI

49 and one-quarter inches in diameter

100-125 years old

Scott remembers taking a call about this tree from the WFYI teleplex that stands in front of it. The tree at 14th Street just east of Meridian Street is a special case, surrounded on all sides by parking lot and above by wires and a transmission tower. “This is sort of like a archeological ruin,” Scott says of the ginko. “You see it and know there’s a history behind it. This was somebody’s yard when it was still a homestead however long ago.” Now the old tree is doing OK against all odds because somebody had the foresight to leave it room to grow.



Ginko Biloba

Stop Five

Ginko biloba at the James Whitcomb Riley Museum Home

528 Lockerbie St.

36 inches in diameter

75-85 years old

Although James Whitcomb Riley probably wasn’t around to plant these trees — he died 90 years ago — Scott believes you can hear poetry if you sit long enough under the ginko trees framing the Lockerbie Street mansion where Riley lived much of his life. “It’s kind of cool that creative people enjoy trees,” Scott says. “Do they get inspiration from them?” Certainly. But, with Riley’s ginkos, they get something else. Scott pulls an arborist’s practical joke on me, handing me ginko fruit without explanation. “Squeeze it,” he says. I soon find out the female ginko drops a fruit that smells very much like dog poop.



Red Oak

Stop Six

Red oak at the President Benjamin Harrison Home

51 inches in diameter

100-150 years old

The thick red oak in front of the Benjamin Harrison home at 12th and Delaware smells a lot better than that ginkgo, and its historic origins are far easier to pinpoint. A receipt still in existence reveals when Harrison purchased the tree from a local nursery. Although it's doubtful that Harrison was out in the front yard with his shovel, he certainly enjoyed the same tree — maybe running his hand over the same bark we can touch today. “That’s a neat idea to me,” Scott says. “To be able to touch the same tree a president touched so many years ago.”



English Oak

Stop Seven

English oaks on Illinois Street near

38th Street

40 years old

This matched pair of three-story tall, columnar oaks may not be as old as many of the other trees on the tour, but Scott finds them significant just the same. Standing on either side of the front door to a private residence, Scott says the trees are the biggest he's seen of this kind in Indiana. Like the ginkgo behind the TV station, these trees look a little out of place along a stretch of homes that have seen better days. "They seem like they are standing sentry," Scott says of the oaks, "protecting the neighborhood."



American Hornbeam



Cucumber Tree



Tulip Tree

Stop Eight

Crown Hill Cemetery

American hornbeam

43 inches in diameter (state record)

100-125 years old

Cucumber tree

44 and one-quarter inches (unofficial state record)

100-125 years old

Tulip tree

55 and a half inches

100-125 years old

Crown Hill Cemetery is the single best place for tree lovers in the city. Scott, who has worked extensively there, says what was once a farm field is now the home of 4,165 lovely trees representing 105 different species. While he enjoys them all, three trees stand out for Scott at Crown Hill. The first is the official largest American hornbeam in Indiana. Short and wide, the trunk looks like a mass of bark-covered sinew called “muscle wood.” Scott smiles at the tree: “It’s a squatty-body, no neck tree,” he says. “But it’s lived a long time.”

As Scott measures the giant cucumber tree, he explains that it is his tree. He adopted it as part of the adopt-a-tree endowment program he helped start at Crown Hill. People can choose a tree, give money to help preserve it and dedicate it to someone’s memory. Or just make it their pet tree.

Even though the cucumber tree is his, Scott hasn’t gotten around to submitting its size to the state for the record books. But he knows it’s the biggest.

The tulip tree he points to stands nearly as tall as the hill that serves as Riley’s final resting place. At the foot of Crown Hill, the tulip tree appears in early photographs of this place as a tiny sapling — barely measuring up to the gravestones around it. Now it dominates the sky and dwarfs the markers for the dead.

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