

Replacement trees adding new look in Southland neighborhoods

By Mike Nolan
Daily Southtown

MAY 15, 2015, 3:27 PM

Some new youngsters have moved into the Timbers Estates subdivision in Tinley Park.

Saplings of honey locust, crab apple, red sunset maple and swamp white oak, all just a few feet tall, are sprouting from parkways where dozens of mature ash trees once stood.

It's a scene being repeated throughout the Southland because a beetle known as the emerald ash borer has decimated tens of thousands of ash trees — leaving some subdivisions virtually treeless and towns shouldering hefty costs to plant new ones.

Having learned a hard lesson, towns are planting a wider variety of trees in case another insect or disease should attack a particular species in the future.

And because of the sheer numbers of new trees, towns are largely relying on residents to take care of them.

The loss of mature ash trees has greatly changed the look of some neighborhoods where the trees were conspicuous.

Streets in some Mokena neighborhoods and subdivisions, such as Tara Hills, have a "very dramatic" appearance since the ash trees have been leveled and smaller trees have replaced them, assistant village administrator Kirk Zoellner said.

He said the village has cut down about 2,200 trees, and by late spring expects to have more than that number planted. Mokena expects to have all of the roughly 3,400 ash trees on village land removed and replaced by the end of next year.

Orland Park is cutting down about 8,000 ash trees and expects to have the job of planting replacements done by late fall of 2016, Joe La Margo, a village spokesman, said.

Homewood finished clearing 2,600 ash trees two years ago and has planted more than 2,000 new trees, according to Jim Tresouthick, the village's landscape maintenance supervisor.

He said the loss of the ash trees, some of which were 80 feet tall, "was a tremendous hit to the value of this community." While streets and sewer lines will deteriorate and need replacing, trees are "the only portion of our infrastructure that gains value as it ages," Tresouthick said.

Probably the hardest-hit community locally was Tinley Park, where roughly 10,000 ash trees — or 40 percent of the tree population in parkways — have been felled. More than 2,000 new trees have been planted, according to Mitch Murdock of Site Design Group, a Chicago company that is overseeing Tinley Park's ash borer response plan.

New trees holding up well

Murdock said ash trees were favored by home builders because they were fast-growing, attractive, relatively inexpensive and hardy, and they became the go-to tree during the home building surge that some Southland towns experienced in the years leading up to the Great Recession.

"They were too popular for their own good," Murdock said recently as crews in Timber Estates plopped new trees into freshly dug holes.

Tara Hills in Mokena also was home to dozens and dozens of ash trees, like the two in the parkway in front of Steve and Karen Curran's house, which was built 15 years ago and the trees planted shortly after, they said.

"They were decent trees," Steve Curran said of the pair.

They were cut down last year and replaced, but Curran said the new trees haven't shown signs of life this spring and he's contacted the village, fearing that they didn't make it through winter.

Mokena and Tinley Park have two-year warranties on new trees being planted, and Zoellner said the brutal winter of 2013-14 did kill about 170 new trees, which will be replaced. He said it's too soon to say what the tree loss from the last winter will be.

Murdock said crews in Tinley Park will keep an eye on the new trees, but that the chilly weather the region has experienced this spring can be a factor in delaying buds and blossoms, making it appear a tree is dead.

In Homewood, winter weather hasn't been a significant factor in killing off new trees, but vehicles have, Tresouthick said.

"We have lost more trees to vehicle impacts than weather-related mortality," he said.

Overall, few new trees are dying because of neglect, and local officials say they're counting on residents to care for the newcomers in the parkways.

"Our approach is, let's see if we can empower residents to nurture and take care of those trees," Zoellner said.

One Tara Hills resident, Pat Hickey, said the two ash trees in his parkway were about 20 feet tall but fell victim to the ash borer. Two new trees were planted last fall, and "we take care of them as if they were our own," he said.

As new trees are planted in Tinley Park, maintenance information is left on homeowners' doorknobs, and tags are left on trees identifying their species in the hope that residents might go online to find out more information, Murdock said.

"To the extent possible, you want to get them (residents) involved in their own community forest," he said.

In Orland Park, where more than 2,000 replacement trees have been planted in parkways, residents "have done a pretty good job" maintaining the trees, and losses of new trees due to winter weather or lack of care

have been "nominal," La Margo said. The village advises residents that new trees need 15 gallons of water each week, he said.

Variety is key

In replacing the lost ash trees, communities are mixing in a variety of species.

"Just like a stock portfolio, you want diversity" in tree selection, Zoellner said.

In Homewood, where village crews have done most of the tree removal and replacement, varieties such as hardy rubber tree, silverbell, trident maple and persian parrotia are finding their way into parkways, Tresouthick said. The village has turned to nurseries in other states such as Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, he said.

The emerald ash borer, a beetle native to Asia, was first confirmed in the United States in 2002 — and in Illinois in June 2006 — and is now in 25 states and two Canadian provinces, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The beetles, about a half-inch long, lay their eggs in ash trees, and the larvae nibble away at the tissue below the bark that carries water and nutrients throughout the trees, causing them essentially to die of thirst.

In a USDA webinar last month, Deborah McCullough, a Michigan State University professor, described the ash borer as the "most destructive and economically costly forest insect to ever invade the U.S.," and that hundreds of millions of ash trees have been lost.

With no national strategy in place to address the problem, local governments, primarily municipalities, are having to shoulder "staggering" costs, McCullough said.

Although the cost of removing the dead trees and replacing them are spread over a few years, the numbers are sobering. Tinley Park expects to spend about \$6 million while Orland Park and Mokena anticipate costs of about \$3 million and \$1.7 million, respectively.

Many communities have turned to insecticides to battle the bug. Chicago has reported good results with tens of thousands of ash trees that have been treated to slow the progress of the infestation. Zoellner said Mokena has been treating 300 ash trees since 2013, losing just a few of them so far.

Tresouthick said Homewood considered insecticides, but it was deemed too costly because it would have to be done over a 20-year period and there were no assurances it would save the trees.

"It was a big investment in time and labor and money," he said. "It was a difficult proposition from the standpoint of efficacy."

While so many felled ash trees are being turned into mulch — Tresouthick said Homewood was generating 2,400 cubic yards of chips annually that it offers to homeowners — much of the tree isn't damaged by the ash borer and could potentially be reclaimed for flooring, furniture or other wood products, according to Edith Makra, chairman of the Illinois Urban Wood Utilization Team.

The group, of which Tresouthick is a member, has a USDA grant and is working with officials in Michigan, Missouri and Wisconsin to develop a market for salvageable ash trees. Some trees have been reused but on a fairly small scale, Makra said.

Tresouthick said some ash trees cut down in Homewood were milled to lumber-length sections and donated to industrial arts students at Homewood-Flossmoor High School.

Makra, who is also director of environmental initiatives for the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus, said reducing the trees into such a low-value material as mulch is a poor use of the usable wood, and there is "genuine pressure on how we are going to manage this (tree) waste."

She said the challenge locally has been a lack of infrastructure to mill trees into usable wood and insufficient demand from end users for the wood to make the investment worthwhile.

"It makes too much sense" to find other uses for the trees, Makra said. "Somebody will make this happen."

Copyright © 2015. Daily Southtown
