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City's trees tell tale of Labor Day storm

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The Labor Day storm is still out there, just beyond Don Leopold's front door on Thurber Street. It is there when he takes a walk on nearby streets, where Leopold is as casually familiar with neighborhood trees as most of us are with neighborhood dogs.

The storm - a violent, fast-moving combination of high winds and thunderstorms known as a derecho - happened five Labor Days ago. Two people died that night. Much of Central New York went without power for days. And almost all the damage was caused by a green avalanche of tens of thousands of falling trees.

"Any one point in space might get hit (with a derecho) every couple of hundred years," said Leopold, a forest ecologist with the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse. "It was something traumatic that most of us managed to live through, but it wasn't as shocking or traumatic as something like a tornado or 9-11."

Still, take a walk with Leopold and you quickly remember the wrath of the storm, which carried winds of up to 115 mph. Within a few blocks of his house, he can point out a towering blue spruce that lost its upper half. He can identify the faint patch of grass where an English walnut tree once

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grew, before it

was torn out by the roots.

He can take you to Comfort Tyler Park, where the storm blew over more than 20 towering Norway maples. Leopold can also point out many silver maples and other "weak-wooded" trees that somehow survived the storm, which taught him his own surprising lesson on the relative durability of trees.

"With the stronger trees, like the Norway maples and the sugar maples, their canopies acted like a kind of sail and the wind just ripped them right out of the ground," Leopold said. "With the other trees, the trees with weaker wood, their limbs broke away and the trees survived. Before the storm, I never would have thought that would have happened."

He feels the aftermath most of all in Oakwood Cemetery, where two lines of sugar maples once created a magnificent tunnel effect. During the storm, all those maples were pulled down.

"Oakwood, I think, was the one place most devastated by that single event," Leopold said. "That canopy (of maples) is something we won't ever see again. It won't happen in our lifetime. It won't happen in our children's lifetimes."

Even Leopold, who grew up with the powerful thunderclaps of the Midwest, had never experienced anything quite like a derecho.

On the night it happened, he sensed some threat in the first rumblings of thunder. Leopold gathered his family and fled into the basement. The storm blew in. It ripped loose a wooden shelf and dropped it onto a bed where his daughter had been sleeping.

All things considered, Leopold says, the storm could have been much worse. The biggest problem, he said, was that Syracuse was overplanted with huge maples. They were too big for the streets. Their limbs often became intertwined with power lines.

The potential danger of that situation was underlined by the recent blackout, Leopold said, which was caused in part by a tree limb falling on an Ohio power line.

"The storm created an opportunity to do things right," Leopold said. "The trees that are left aren't going to topple over. They've put on a lot of growth and recovered very nicely. And the city did a nice job of planting a diversity of trees. I think the city is not only going to look better, but it will be better buffered in the future against these kind of events."

He is especially pleased with the pattern of new trees - including magnolias, serviceberries and redbuds - at Comfort Tyler Park. He predicts the park will be more attractive than ever when those trees reach maturity. And he has developed a particular fondness for the wounded survivors of the storm, the trees you find almost anywhere that you stop to look.

"These are living things," Leopold said, "and you don't necessarily get rid of them just because they're missing a limb."

His opinion was reinforced on Comstock Avenue, where Joyce Hoffman, 78, was gardening beneath a tall Douglas fir in her front yard. As Leopold held a branch in the way a doctor holds a patient's wrist, Joyce remembered how she and her husband, Arthur, used to watch their children play beneath the tree.

The Labor Day storm tore off the upper half. The Hoffmans, the next morning, came outside to look it over. They knew a lot of people would have simply cut it down, but they also knew a Douglas fir can live for hundreds of years. "My husband wasn't going to let it go," Joyce said.

Arthur died two years later. Despite the scars, despite the storm, Joyce is glad she has the tree. Sean Kirst is a columnist with The Post-Standard. His columns appear Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Call him at 470-6015 or e-mail him at citynews@syracuse.com.

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