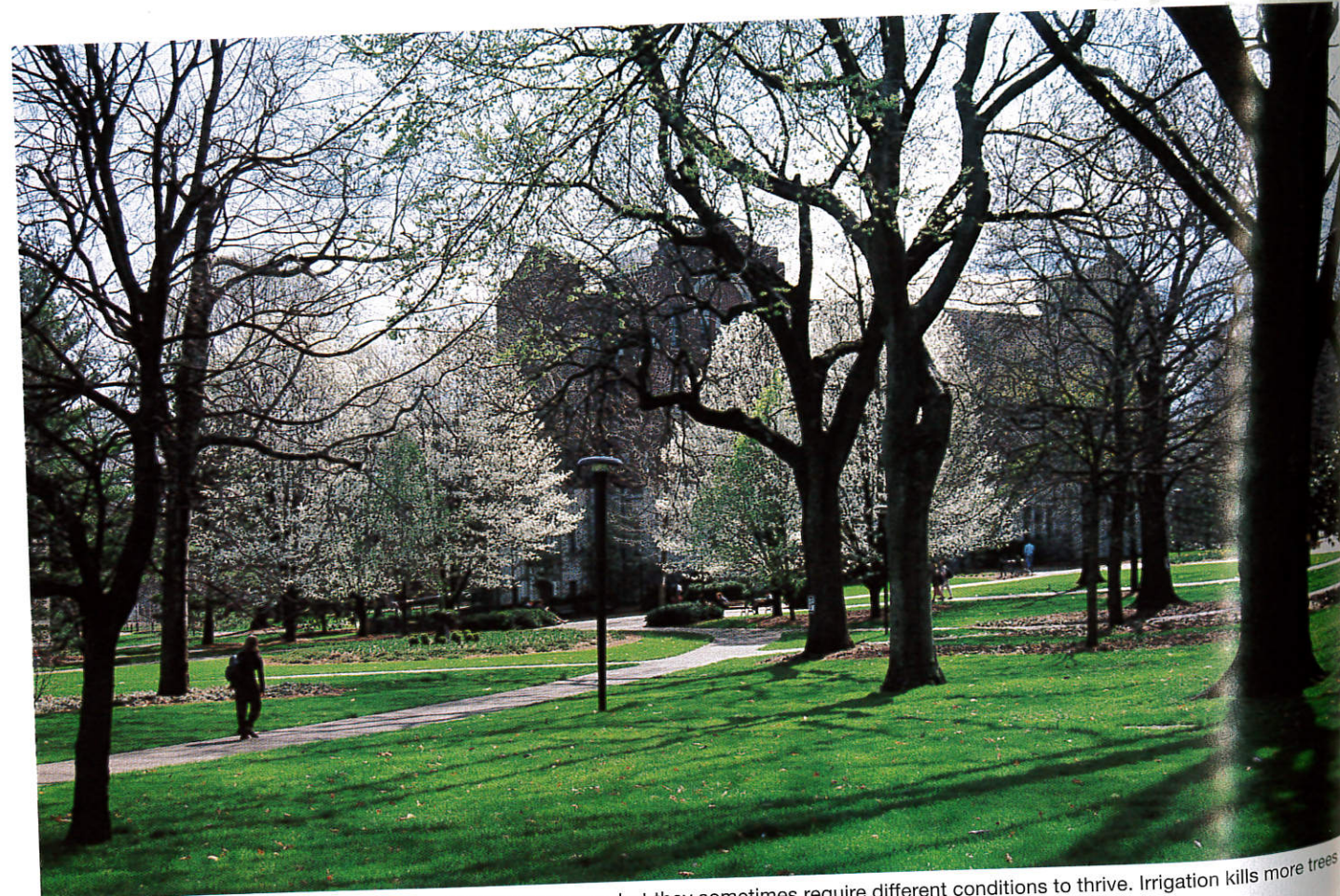


In the Company of

# TREES

DESPITE DROUGHT, STARLINGS, BULLDOZERS, AND HUMANS,  
VANDERBILT'S TREES ENDURE

BY GAYNELLE DOLL



Trees, lawns, and bedding plants make for a beautiful campus, but they sometimes require different conditions to thrive. Irrigation kills more trees on campus than does drought.

VANDERBILT HAS ALWAYS LOVED ITS TREES.

Bishop Holland McTyeire planted them, nurtured them, and loved them so well that whenever one had to be felled in the name of progress, he felt compelled to turn his back. James Kirkland, Vanderbilt's second chancellor, found their loss so painful that he was said by his biographer to leave town on occasion to avoid witnessing their destruction. Chancellor Harvie Branscomb felt sufficient remorse about sacrificing two choice bald cypresses to make way for Kissam Quadrangle that, upon his retirement, he paid for replacements out of his own pocket.

Trees, some of them older than the United States, have provided shelter against soggy May Commencements. They have yielded branches and berries and cones for a hundred hangings of the greens. They have provided samples for generations of Nashville schoolchildren's leaf identification projects. They have endured the insults of countless poster nails, Hitchcock-esque invasions of starlings—and a few errant student drivers.

If you have visited campus recently, witnessed the ubiquitous silhouette of construction cranes against the winter sky, and wondered how long the trees could hold their own against the relentless march of progress, rest assured. Vanderbilt's trees, numbering perhaps 6,000 by one educated guess, are as cherished as ever, though no one has left town lately at the prospect of a sycamore's demise. In an average year Vanderbilt plants several hundred trees to replace those that have fallen victim to age, disease, or the stress of living amidst thousands of humans.

"Vanderbilt has one of the most beautiful and well-maintained campuses in the country," observes William Shain, director of admissions. "The trees are a major part of that. Our surveys of admitted students show that the campus setting is a powerful draw in attracting students."

An 1879 catalog published six years after Vanderbilt's founding shows that the campus already featured at least 300 species of trees and shrubs. Bishop McTyeire, the University's visionary first president and tireless promoter, transformed what was largely treeless land, planting dozens of species himself, including magnolias, elms, tulip poplars, and the zelkovas that still grow near the Divinity School. Many were saplings taken from the hills of Hillsboro Pike and raised in an arboretum on campus.

Chancellor Kirkland's wife, Elizabeth, organized faculty wives and other women to form the Vanderbilt Garden Club, which over the

years has been responsible for the planting of many Vanderbilt trees, including the magnolia screens that line West End and 21st avenues.

In 1988, the Vanderbilt campus was granted official arboretum status by the American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta. Vanderbilt's collection of trees focuses on native species maintained to look much as they would in nature, with a minimum of pruning or shearing. Many of them are identified with tags, thanks



Vanderbilt's original 75-acre campus was largely treeless, so saplings were planted alongside new building construction, evident in this early photo of Benson Science Hall, erected in 1880. Many of the young trees were taken from the hills surrounding Hillsboro Pike.

to a 1968 gift made by Mrs. James Mapheus Smith, a former Vanderbilt librarian, in honor of her husband, who earned a Vanderbilt doctorate in 1931.

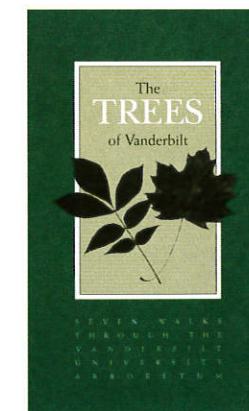
"Quite a number of other colleges and universities have arboreta," notes Pam Sevy, University landscape architect. "But they are more commonly found among universities with a horticulture or landscape department. What also makes Vanderbilt's arboretum stand out is that it's not a separate entity. The entire campus is an arboretum."

That's good for the people who study and work at Vanderbilt, but not always ideal for the trees. "We can't just set spindly baby trees out there in the middle of a big lawn where people might be tempted to take shortcuts," Sevy says. "We have to buy good-sized, sturdy specimens to give trees a fighting chance."

Sevy, who is primarily responsible for choosing the new trees that Vanderbilt plants each fall and winter, concentrates on species that do well in the Nashville region and are naturally disease-resistant. Most are bought from nurseries around McMinnville, Tennessee. Vanderbilt's trees generally are tough enough to withstand the drought conditions of the past two years. But it's possible to kill them with kindness.

"We want trees, but people also enjoy green lawns," says Sevy.

"Our mature trees grew up not having supplemental water until about 10 years ago when we began irrigating our large open lawn spaces. Some of the trees, particularly sugar maples, haven't handled it real well. In a forest setting, instead of lawn



The University's Office of Publications and Design published *The Trees of Vanderbilt* in 1994. Seven different walks on campus are described in this small volume, along with information about many native American species found in Vanderbilt's arboretum. Copies are available at the Vanderbilt Bookstore for \$10.95 each; call 615/343-4369.

you'd find fallen leaves and rotted wood, which sets up a wonderful kind of biological soup for fungi that draw on the nutrients at the tree roots. That's what really makes trees happy."

### Revenge of the Trees



Trees also suffer from soil compacted by lawn mowers, other heavy equipment—and rarefied scholarly hot air. An elm that flourished outside the Peabody Administration Building was known as the tree of knowledge. Educational administrators gathered under its summertime canopy for discussions. When it died, Peabody president Bruce Payne wrote in 1936 that it had been talked to death.

Most of the time trees suffer in silence to the human insults inflicted on them. Occasionally they strike back.

"Two years ago a coed was walking under a tree when a hedge apple fell and struck her on the head," remembers Mark Petty, who as director of general services oversees day-to-day maintenance of Vanderbilt's grounds. "We don't plant persimmon trees anymore, but we've got one in front of Branscomb that drops fruit on the sidewalk. It's slippery and we spend a lot of time washing it off.

"Anything with nuts is a problem," adds Sevy. "And the fruit from female ginkgo trees creates a real odor problem. Until recently you couldn't tell the males from the females before they were 10 or 12 years old and started bearing fruit. Nowadays you can buy male clones, but we still have plenty of stinky females around."

Last year during Reunion a maple crashed to the ground between Calhoun and Garland Hall after a rainstorm. Following



Above: Among the rarest trees on campus are these Japanese zelkovas growing between the Divinity School and the Owen Graduate School of Management. Bishop Holland McTyeire planted Vanderbilt's zelkovas as well as many other trees on campus.

Left: Campus planners generally avoid planting trees with messy fruits, but these crabapples growing near the Law School compensate for a bit of untidiness with spectacular spring flowers and, later in the season, fruits that provide brilliant color and feasts for resident birds.

the ice storm that paralyzed Nashville in 1994, Vanderbilt's grounds crews and contracted tree surgeons spent three months cleaning up broken branches and damaged trees.

On a day-to-day basis, two of Vanderbilt's landscape gardeners, Peter Pent and Lee Langley, are primarily responsible for the University's tree and shrub maintenance. Part of their job is patrolling



#### Most reviled species on campus:

The inaptly named tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*). Imported from the Orient because it grows fast and survives street conditions, it becomes huge. It's also weak-wooded, unstable and messy. "It should be renamed the weed of hell," comments Vanderbilt landscape gardener Peter Pent.



Most impressive comeback by a species: Dawn redwoods, now growing near the Divinity School, were known only by fossil records until the 1940s, when living specimens were found in China.

Biggest by-product: Leaves. Millions of 'em. Vanderbilt's compost heap, located at 31st and Blakemore avenues, is bigger than a football field and grows to 10 feet high during leaf-raking season.



#### Most ardent non-human fans:

A toss-up between the squirrels and the starlings that developed an unhealthy obsession for Vanderbilt's magnolias in the mid-'90s. Fortunately, says Mark Petty, who oversees grounds maintenance, "Starlings don't have long life spans. We ran them off with loud noises that made their lives uncomfortable and after doing that for a generation or so, their habits changed and they went elsewhere."

tion by the Tennessee state forester as Tennessee State Champion Trees—the largest known of their specimen. They include a sweet-bay magnolia, southern hackberry, Japanese zelkova, swamp white oak, Chinese scholartree, Ohio buckeye, and hedge maple, or English field maple.

As society has become increasingly mobile, and homeowners are less likely to have the time or space to plant the slow-growing magnificent kings of the tree hierarchy like white oaks and beeches, Vanderbilt's venerable trees become more valuable than ever.

Now, in the quiet cool months of a Tennessee winter, with lawns dormant and leaves raked, Vanderbilt's gardeners are still pruning, planning, and planting more trees for posterity. With any luck, one day some of them will be champions, too.

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The fan-shaped leaves of the ginkgo tree have been found in fossils that date back 280 million years. Kernels of their plumlike fruits are considered a delicacy by the Chinese, but the fruit's outside flesh is famous for its obnoxious odor. Recent cloning technology has made it easier to obtain odor-free male ginkgos. The ginkgos pictured here grow outside the Hobbs Laboratory on the Peabody campus.

## NOTABLE

#### Tallest tree on campus:

A willow oak estimated to be 80 to 90 feet tall. Vanderbilt inherited it by acquiring the Bill Wilkerson Hearing and Speech Center at the corner of 19th and Edgehill avenues.

## NOTORIOUS

#### Nominee for the Methuselah award:

The massive bur oak near Garland Hall, growing at the time of the American Revolution and also known as the bicentennial oak.