

Tree tours present a cast of characters

CHRISTOPHER DEWOLF, The Gazette Published: Saturday, June 07

Late last month, as a breeze rustled through the leaves overhead, a small group of people stood at the corner of Laval Ave. and Sherbrooke St., waiting for a tree tour to begin.

Their guide was Bronwyn Chester, a writer fascinated by trees, who has decided to share her knowledge by taking people around the streets and parks of Montreal. Her plan, she said, is to introduce Montrealers to the arboreal diversity of the city, to expose them to an entire world of trees that is often ignored or taken for granted.

Chester began by handing out a list of trees found on and near Laval Ave. - more than three dozen in all - then unfolded a map of Montreal's largest parks.



Montreal from the ground up: This guide's all bark: Writer Bronwyn Chester gives a tree tour on McGill campus. The world of trees is often taken for granted, she says.

DAVE SIDAWAY THE GAZETTE

The area around Montreal is where the richest forest in Quebec is found, but it's also the most heavily farmed and exploited forest," she said, gesturing to the parks on the map.

"We've managed to replace a degree of the biodiversity that once existed and, in between, on the streets, we've created bridges between those islands of green."

As Chester ushered the group up Laval, she pointed toward the street's thick canopy of trees, explaining that many of them are maples that were planted only 30 years ago - a bit surprising when you consider that the street was first developed in the 1860s.

"Before World War II, this street would have been completely covered by white elms. They were like umbrellas, they provided a lot of shade, but most of them were removed because of Dutch elm disease." She gestured to a large tree whose trunk occupied most of the sidewalk. "After the elms died, they were replaced by maples, which grow very quickly, but they become so big they've fallen out of favour."

As the tour progressed, Chester explained the different varieties of trees found on Laval Ave., including some that are indigenous to North America (like the honey locust, whose thick thorns were once used for nails) and others that have been imported through the centuries (like the katsura, a Japanese tree that became especially popular in the late 19th century). Along the way, she noted how trees, like everything else, are subject to the whims of fashion.

"Somebody asked why there are coniferous trees in the planters on Duluth St. It's because they were very trendy when the street was renovated (in the late 1980s). What's big now is the Kentucky coffee tree, which was planted a couple of years ago in the median of St. Joseph (Blvd.) It looks dead for half the year but when it's mature, it has the most magnificent canopy."

By the time the tour ended, in an alley just behind Laval, the street's trees had been transformed from one indistinguishable mass into something more like a palimpsest - or maybe a drama with a particularly interesting cast of characters.

"I think everybody likes a tree or trees in general, but few of us know the names of those trees. It changes your relationship if you know them and the story behind them," Chester said.

Bronwyn Chester's next tour is at 10 a.m. tomorrow at McGill University. Visit foretmontreal.com or call 514-284-7384.

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