

So What's the **Big Deal** *about* **Big Trees?**

A Personal Reflection and Perspectives on the Virginia Big Tree Program

By P. Eric Wiseman, Ph.D.

As coordinator of the Virginia Big Tree Program, I am often asked why big trees matter. And I usually preface my answer with the caveat that my passion for big trees is just one perspective, influenced by a lifetime of personal and professional experiences with trees. My personal perspectives have evolved not only as I have gotten older, but also as my

professional interactions with big trees have changed. As an adolescent I never gave much thought to big trees in particular. Sure, there were distinctive big trees in the neighborhood that served as landmarks or hang-out spots that I still remember today, but I didn't think about them much otherwise. I just liked being around trees and nature.

Although my current occupation as a forestry professor focuses mostly on the science and statistics of trees, I had formative experiences early in my career as a commercial arborist that shape my views today. As an arborist, there were two things that broadened my perspective on big trees: personal interactions with big trees and also with the people who



Eric Wiseman discusses the national champion Osage-orange in Charlotte County with Bob Leverett, chair of the National Cadre of Tree Measuring Experts.

care about big trees. Being an arborist put me in close physical contact with big trees on a daily basis. I climbed with rope and harness to prune them or to protect them with support cables and lightning protection systems, applied arborceuticals to treat pests or nutrient deficiencies, and examined their structure to determine risks of uprooting or stem failure. I experienced their massive scale from a perspective high above the ground and encountered the small ecosystems that they nurture in their crowns that are distinct from those at ground level.

I also dealt firsthand with the chaos and destruction caused by big trees when extreme weather brought them crashing down upon homes and streets. This latter point helped me to develop a healthier relationship with big trees. Despite how much we love them, sometimes we have to let big trees go for sake of people and property.



Ben with his national champion Japanese tree lilac at Maymont Park in Richmond.
PHOTO COURTESY OF BEN BLANKENSHIP.

Watch out Veteran Big Tree Hunters, There's a New Tree Hunter in Town!

Ben Blankenship is a sixteen-year-old who lives in Richmond, Va. He has been hunting trees for three years and has 83 trees in the Virginia Big Tree Register including 27 state champions and five national champions.

I've been fascinated with plants and trees since I was young. I used to always comment on the gum balls from the sweetgum tree (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) and touch the bark of every tree when we would go on nature walks. I am autistic and nature made me feel connected and still does as I get older. I feel like I can relate to trees. Every individual tree is different, just like me.

I would say what really started my entire journey was the beautiful, old black oak (*Quercus velutina*) on my grandparents' property in southern Dinwiddie County. I wondered if there were trees bigger than it, and where it ranked among other trees. As a result I started looking for larger trees. One day a family friend showed me a massive loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) tree near my grandparents' farm. It was the largest pine tree I had ever seen (172 inches in circumference). We felt like this had to be one of the largest ones in Virginia, so we called a VDOF forester who showed us how to measure the tree, and we nominated it. The tree at the time ended up being the fourth largest loblolly pine in Virginia.

This is what started my interest in big trees. I wanted to find more trees like that loblolly pine, and I became dedicated to finding trees. Since 2017, I have been recertifying and finding new trees for the Virginia Big Tree Program. I feel like trees are a part of me and I feel very glad to be a part of the Big Tree community. As of 2020 I have measured about 200 trees with about 80 registered or to be registered in the program. During this time, I have found two national champions.

One question people might wonder is how I find big trees. You can find big trees anywhere! I've found a few in office parks. If I find a specimen in any location that looks unusually large for its species, I will measure it. If its score compares to trees of its type already in the register, then it is nominated. Most of my trees are not "big" because some tree species don't get but so large. Most people who look for big trees look for the largest and fattest trees out there. Most people don't think that small trees can be champions, but some of my most successful finds are small trees that others might overlook.

Another common question I get is what do I like most about measuring big trees. I am excited by the possibility of finding new trees, and I like calculating their dimensions. I enjoy being out in nature.

Over my years of measuring trees my favorite tree is the national champion Japanese tree lilac, at Maymont that I found a few years ago. I like the fact that trees significantly larger than previous champions can still be found, like this one. This is probably my favorite tree due to its very unusual size for a Japanese tree lilac and just the specialness of it.



A beautiful willow oak lined street in Fairlington development in Arlington and Alexandria. PHOTO BY ROBERT LLEWELLYN AND THE REMARKABLE TREES OF VIRGINIA PROJECT.

I encountered people from all walks of life when I worked as an arborist. From these conversations I developed an appreciation for diverse viewpoints on the value of big trees. Some people had utilitarian perspectives, interested strictly in how the trees benefitted their property value or income stream. Others had esoteric perspectives, talking about trees as

if they were a member of the family, sometimes even giving them names and lamenting their possible demise as an emotional trauma. What I learned from these interactions is that all perspectives about big trees are genuine and merit our consideration.

I believe that you can have a meaningful conversation about big trees only when people are truly

engaged. This is one of the most important roles of the Virginia Big Tree Program—keeping people engaged in conversations about big trees. I see one of the biggest challenges to natural resource sustainability—whatever the context—being ignorance and apathy. As we isolate ourselves increasingly from the natural world due to where we live,

The Big Tree Program Timeline

1940

American Forestry Association (today American Forests) releases the first National Register of Big Trees, 748 trees in total

1961

Two national champions from Virginia: a loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) in Dinwiddie County and a post oak (*Quercus stellata*) in Charlotte County

1970

Two national champions from Virginia: a loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) in Dinwiddie County, and an Osage orange (*Maclura pomifera*) at Red Hill Plantation

Virginia Forests launches the Virginia Big Tree Hunt and partners with Virginia Cooperative Extension and Virginia Dept. of Forestry to obtain big tree nominations. Charlie Finley and William McElfresh are co-coordinators

1983

Byron Carmean and Gary Williamson join forces and start hunting big trees

1984

Mary Foust becomes Virginia's Big Tree Program Coordinator

1989

Glenda Parrish becomes Virginia's Big Tree Program Coordinator

1997

Jeff Kirwan becomes Virginia's Big Tree Program Coordinator

work, and how we choose to spend our leisure time, we risk losing our understanding of the interconnectivity between people and nature. If we don't understand that interconnectivity, then we don't understand our interdependence. As Harrison Ford recently stated, "Nature doesn't need people—people need nature." And so therein I see the value of big trees, through an admittedly narrow lens, where big trees can foster connections of people to nature.

Big trees can foster this connection in two ways. First, people are innately curious about superlatives—the *Guinness Book of World Records* has an enduring quality for that reason. You can use this same tactic as an initial hook when you clue someone in about a state or national champion tree. This gives you an opening to discuss tree biology and forest ecology—to explain how trees grow to large proportions and how environmental conditions affect how fast and how big a tree grows. Reel them in a bit further by pointing out that each species has its own champion. Next you can talk about biodiversity, forest succession, and forest structure, explaining that some tree species max out at relatively small sizes because they occupy an under-story or mid-story niche,

and that healthy forests comprise a mix of species for this reason. Keep reeling as you point out that very few trees in a given species or forest reach extraordinary size. This leads to a discussion of genetic variability within tree species and its importance to forest resiliency, as well as the role that veteran trees play as unique reservoirs for carbon storage and biodiversity in healthy forests. Finally the conversation can make its way to forest conservation and big tree preservation. The bottom line is that trees do not reach extraordinary size without conscious decisions to allow some forests to age and to actively manage certain trees to protect them from storm damage, lightning strikes, pests, and bulldozers. The arc of this conversation may last only a few minutes, but the impacts on understanding and appreciation can be profound. In the end we only conserve what we value, and we won't value something if we don't understand it.

The second way I believe big trees foster connections to nature is that big trees are a great example of nearby nature. Today in Virginia four out of five people live in an urban area. This might lead you to believe that interactions with big trees are hard to come by. In truth, many of

our documented big trees reside in urban areas—parks, cemeteries, golf courses, college campuses, and residential lawns. So the chance for a big tree encounter is closer than you think. The Virginia Big Tree Program wants to encourage interactions with big trees because you can't truly appreciate a big tree until you have stood toe to root with it. Whenever permissible, we include information about the location of big trees and provide web maps that help you find them. Even if there isn't a state or national champion big tree nearby, there certainly has to be a local champ.

What's the biggest tree in your neighborhood, in your town, or in your county? That is something worth discovering and sharing within your community. In fact, several Virginia communities have established their own big tree registers to encourage local engagement with nature.

What does the future hold for the Virginia Big Tree Program? For one thing, I believe we need to go 'back to the future' and revisit the roots of Virginia Big Trees as a youth outreach program. Each year, I look at every big tree nomination (300+ trees this year), and only a handful of these involve children. We have to reverse that trend. I'm not an expert

1998
Andrew Meeks and John Peterson start creating the Virginia Big Trees website

2004
Ruth Williams (currently Sterner) becomes the first Virginia Big Tree Intern

Tree lookup functionality added to the Virginia Big Trees website

2008
Nancy Ross Hugo, Jeff Kirwan, and photographer Robert Llewellyn publish *Remarkable Trees of Virginia*

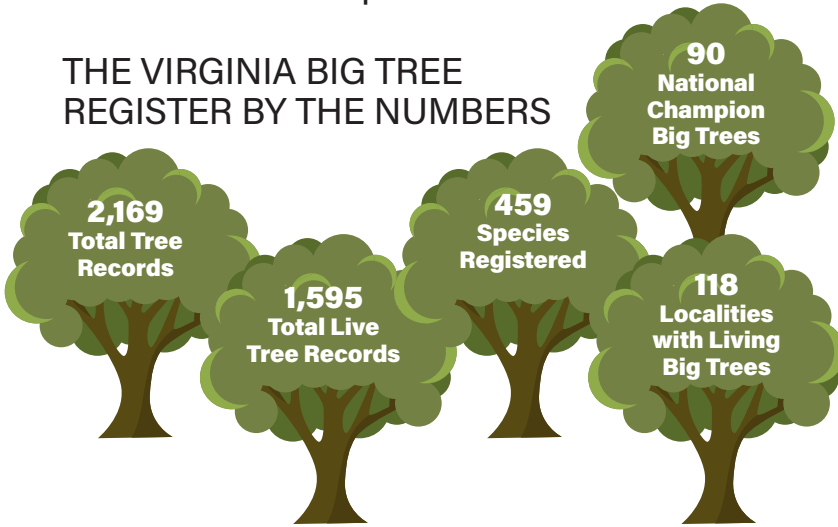
2013
Eric Wiseman becomes Virginia's Big Tree Program Coordinator

2016
Sarah Gugercin redesigns the Virginia Big Trees website

2017
Virginia awards the Virginia Big Tree Program the Scenic Trees award

2020
Virginia Big Tree Program 50th Anniversary

THE VIRGINIA BIG TREE REGISTER BY THE NUMBERS



BIG TREE REPORTS IN 2019
323 Total Reports

- 51 Individuals Submitted Reports
 - 84 Intern Reports
 - 40 Coordinator Reports
- Fairfax County** is the locality with most living big trees (86)



- Caroline County:** Tallest living tree - 184 feet (*Liriodendron tulipifera*)
- City of Fairfax:** Widest crown living tree - 151 feet (*Quercus alba*)
- Southampton County:** Largest trunk living tree - 520 inches (*Taxodium distichum*)
- Southampton County:** Highest total score living tree - 612 points (*Taxodium distichum*)



2019 TOP THREE VOLUNTEER REPORTERS

- 48 Ben Blankenship
- 37 Byron Carmean & Gary Williamson
- 25 Greg Zell & Davis Camalier



Byron Carmean	1,132
Gary Williamson	931
Greg Zell	147
Robert Vickers	122

100 THE CENTURY LIST
(Active big tree hunters with over 100 big trees nominated or measured)

PAST NOTABLE BIG TREE HUNTERS



on youth outreach. I geek out on the taxonomy and mathematics of the Big Tree Program, so I need others who are able to bring inspiration and collaboration that will help me to reinvigorate youth involvement in big trees. What better way to facilitate youth interactions with nearby nature than to find the biggest tree at a school, on a campus or in a local park. In these settings, students learn to identify a tree, measure it, map it, and photograph it. (Maybe even put it on Instagram!) If you are creative, you can even sneak in a bit of learning about geography and trigonometry with young folks as they locate and measure big trees.

I am humbled and privileged to be the state coordinator of the Virginia Big Tree Program. It's not a big part of my job as a forestry professor at Virginia Tech, but it has afforded me many new relationships with people from all walks of life across the state who have one thing in common—a passion for big trees and a commitment to sharing these trees with the rest of the commonwealth.

The vast majority of efforts put into the Virginia Big Tree Program over the last 50 years has come from volunteerism and in-kind services of hobbyists and natural resource professionals. We owe them a collective expression of gratitude. Let's hope that this passion for big trees persists for the next 50 years so we can continue to marvel at these wonders of the natural world. 🌳



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