

A guide to the eight great trees of Jamestown

By Patti Cassidy

In a town like Jamestown, filled with trees of all shapes and hues, it's hard to pick favorites. Everyone's bound to have a pet because it's beautiful, interesting, or maybe because it carries special memories ("That's the tree where Johnny broke his arm when he was building a tree fort" or "We stood under that tree when Harry proposed to me.").

The island itself is a nationally recognized arboreal treasure. A sign at the entrance to Jamestown proudly proclaims that for the third year in a row we've been named a "Tree City USA" by the National Arbor Day Foundation. Since 2001 the Jamestown Tree Committee has protected and maintained our leafy friends

because, they say, "The protection of these valuable material resources will serve to enhance the community in the following ways:

- Aid in the prevention of air, noise and visual pollution;
- Aid in the stabilization of soil;
- Enhance property values;
- Provide glare and heat protection;
- Reduce storm water runoff and costs associated therewith and replenish groundwater supplies;
- Enhance the aesthetics and general quality of life on the island and maintain the island's rural character."

But even with all of this, outstanding trees just cry out for spe-

cial recognition. So, forthwith, here is a list of eight great trees of Jamestown.

1) THE EUROPEAN CUTLEAF BEECH AT ST. MATTHEWS.

This 65-foot tall beauty was "Miss April, 1996" on the Rhode Island Tree Council's "Notable Trees of Rhode Island" calendar. She's well into the species' average 125 year lifespan.

Planted in the late 19th century, when Jamestown was booming as a tourist destination for vacationers who wanted a more rural atmosphere than glittering Newport afforded, the beech was an example of the species that was brought to America by settlers in 1792. When this tree was planted, there were about 1,000 residents on Conanicut Island and the beech was a symbol of their faith in the future.

And that faith hasn't been misplaced. The tree has been with the island through war and peace and through fair weather and disasters, like the hurricane of 1938, which devastated so many other trees.

Beeches as a rule are magnificent trees. "If you only plant one tree in your life, plant

a beech," one nursery proclaims. This one is no exception, especially when it turns golden bronze in the fall.

2) THE BLACK TUPELO ON WATSON FARM.

Even though the beech at St. Matthew's is old, this native species tree is the longevity champ. It stands near an ancient stone wall in a swampy area on Watson Farm, and dates back hundreds of years, according to Matt Largess of Largess Forestry, who says it's the oldest tree on the island. That's pretty likely, too, since the lifespan of tupelos can reach 600 years.

So when Coddington's colonists grazed their sheep on the island after he negotiated the rights to the grass and marsh from the Narragansetts in the 1600s, they most likely mowed right past this old tree and its relatives!

Black tupelo are also known as gum trees and are highly prized in the South for the honey they produce. They've been used to make wooden pipes, railway ties and even eyedrops (don't try this last at home), making them one of the most versatile species of tree on the island.

3) THE TULIP POPLAR AT WATSON FARM.

According to records, this 106-foot-high, 200-year-old tree standing by the parking area at Watson Farm is the tallest tree on the island. There's a swing hanging from one of the branches these days, and in the summer, large peachy-yellow flowers bloom high in the foliage among the tulip shaped leaves.

This tree, too, is probably a native to the island, though it may have been cultivated by the farm's first owners, the Hutchinson family, who had similar trees planted around their home in Massachusetts. Because the wood is lightweight, it was used extensively for canoe-making in some areas, and in the late 1800s, rheumatism sufferers downed its tonic for relief from their discomfort.

Just before the Revolutionary War, many communities designated one tree a "Liberty Tree" where colonists who were opposed to England's rule would gather. Though many towns chose oaks or elms, the longest lived "Liberty Tree" was a tulip poplar in Annapolis which died there in the 1980s, long beyond its expected lifespan.

4) THE GOLDEN HINOKI CYPRESS TREE AT 216 HIGHLAND DRIVE.

Here's another outstanding island beauty that graces the entrance to gorgeous and partially hidden Lippincott home. In 2003, the golden hinoki's photo was "Miss January" on the Rhode Island Tree Council's "Notable Trees of Rhode Island" calendar. The golden-green foliage is distinctive and hints at her noble heritage. The Japanese, after all, used hinoki wood to build royal buildings, temples and shrines and to make fans for aristocrats. In the US today, aromatherapists use hinoki oil to relieve stress, but it's also been used for easing asthma symptoms and other respiratory congestion.

In a way, the tree was a gift from Bristol, because the hinoki was one of the plants introduced to the US in the early 1860's by Dr. George Rogers Hall of Bristol shortly after Japan was opened to American trade.

5) THE CHINESE CHESTNUT TREE AT THORNCROFT.

One of the most haunting sites on the island is the arboretum that thrives on the west end of Narragansett Avenue. Planted around the turn of the century,

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