

Bill

Weeping for a willow, marking a mighty oak

Toronto says it wouldn't have taken down ancient tree unless there was no other option

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CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

All good things must come to an end, including majestic old trees that add grace and splendour to their surroundings.

I got a note recently from Karen Gordon, along with a photo of a small, elderly woman standing next to an enormous willow tree in La Rose Park, near Scarlett Road and Eglinton Avenue.

The trunk of the tree was as big as a compact car. The woman, who had her 99th birthday last month and is just five feet tall, is completely dwarfed by it in the photo, which Gordon said was taken a few years ago.

"This is the largest tree I have ever seen, and it needs to be marked for maintenance and preservation by the city," she said. "We christened it William, because Willie wasn't respectful enough for a tree of its age."

I was thoroughly impressed by William's size and durability. So I decided to pay him a visit.

Little did I know that I would be paying my respects. When I got to the park, all that was left of William was a tree trunk that appeared to have been freshly cut.

William was obviously cut for a good reason: the city puts substantial effort into preserving trees and would not have taken it down unless there was no other choice.

But all was not lost. On my way to find William, I spotted another massive tree on the boulevard in front of the park that also had a car-sized trunk and is no less impressive. I later learned it's a Red Oak, and decided it's as likely to be a she-tree as a he-tree. So I named it Ruby.

A spray-painted green dot on Ruby showed it has passed an infection test that did not involve a nasal swab. But considering its age and William's fate, I fear another chainsaw massacre.

Status: I asked urban forestry for information on William and Ruby, including the approximate age of both trees, which it did not provide. But it did say



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The city put a lot of work into preserving a massive red oak tree on the boulevard in front of La Rose Park.

that William "was removed as urban forestry's inspection confirmed that it presented a significant risk of failure and maintenance work would not have returned it to a healthy state. Failure of this tree would impose severe health and safety concerns to park users and damage to park property, as the tree was near a pathway and children's playground."

As for Ruby, urban forestry described it as "a 153 cm red oak tree. It has been tagged and marked with spray paint as it received TreeAzin injections (an insecticide) in 2019 as part of the City's integrated pest management work to prevent severe defoliation to high-risk trees caused by European gypsy moths, an invasive species which prefer to feed on the leaves of oak trees and their appetites are voracious enough to jeopardize the health of the tree. The tree was found to be in fair condition during its 2019 inspection."

It has me wondering about other marvellous old trees. Please send me photos of your favourites, along with descriptions of why they're important to you and a precise location. I'll write about some and provide information on how to help ensure they're preserved.

What's broken in your neighbourhood? Wherever you are in Greater Toronto, we want to know. Email jlakey@thestar.ca or follow @TOS-tarFixer on Twitter