The six New England states have many things in common, and one fact is that each of these states requires (or enables) the appointment of a municipal tree warden. For example, Connecticut’s General Statutes, Chapter 451, Sections 23-58, requires the chief elected official in each town to appoint a tree warden. This law describes the powers and duties of the tree warden: “have the care and control of all trees and shrubs in whole or in part within the limits of any public road or grounds and within the limits of his town or borough, except those along state highways...” This law, passed over one hundred years ago, places a great deal of responsibility into the hands of one individual.

Legislative History
Historically, tree warden laws were passed during a period known as the ‘first conservation era’. These laws follow the example set by New Jersey in 1893, which places responsibility into the hands of a local community shade tree commission. The first tree warden law, in contrast, was passed in Massachusetts in 1896 (the bill was sponsored by the newly formed Massachusetts Forestry Association) with the other New England states following suit, and it assigns the duty to one person. It is important to note that during this period tree planting in the rural forest and road settings was greatly promoted by many influential people and organizations. This was a period when people and governments were waking to the need to conserve natural resources.

Tree Warden: Origins of a Name
Where did the term tree warden come from? The prevailing, popular notion to date is that the term stems from colonial days and some New England communities had people responsible for the public trees and these were called tree wardens. However, no documented evidence confirming this is known. An alternative hypothesis is that German-born and educated forester Bernard E. Fernow influenced the sponsors of the legislation. Fernow was one the most important promoters of scientific forestry in America but was somewhat overshadowed by Gifford Pinchot, the founder of the National Forest System. Fernow aggressively promoted the care of shade trees in parks and along streets in virtually the same breath as promoting forest conservation. In “The Care of Trees in Lawn, Street and Park”, Fernow argues that the term “tree warden” should be used instead of forester as a title for someone who is responsible for public shade trees. Fernow was widely read in the late 1800s. Perhaps the bill sponsors learned of the term by letter, lecture, or book, agreed with Fernow’s reasoning, and applied the term to the bill.

Qualifications, Education, and Voluntary Certification
As the decades passed, the Connecticut landscape changed. More people and greater material needs brought more conflicts between people and public trees. More cars, roads, construction, insect pests, disease, and pollution have increased stress on trees. At the same time trees in municipalities, like in the rural forest, aged and matured. The outcome of the increased pressures on city and village trees has been that they either fall apart or die earlier than their deep forest brethren.

As a result of cultural and ecological changes, the role of the tree warden changed as well. Where the initial intent of the tree warden laws was to position a tree conservationist in each city and town, the role evolved into one of tree remover. This was primarily in response to public safety issues brought on by old and decaying trees threatening life, limb, and property. In addition, Americans have become more litigious with threats of lawsuits constantly on the mind of municipal employees, managers, and elected officials.
Tree warden laws do not mandate any qualifications. In 1992 the Tree Warden Association of Connecticut was founded primarily to increase the skills and knowledge of tree wardens (the Massachusetts Tree Wardens and Foresters Association was founded in 1913 by George E. Stone). This was done based on the results of a statewide assessment conducted in 1991 indicating that tree wardens lacked the skills and knowledge needed to perform essential duties. The organization now conducts three educational annual events and prints a newsletter and tree warden directory.

For several years, members of the board debated whether or not to amend Connecticut state law to require tree wardens to possess some qualifications. This was rejected for many reasons so the association founded the Tree Warden School and Certification Program. The intent was to not only to provide a means to improving the tree warden skills and knowledge, but also to provide tangible recognition sometimes referred to as “credentialing.” Tree wardens voluntarily participate in six classes ranging from tree structure and function, to risk assessment, to public meeting management, to law. To be certified they must obtain at least a 70% passing grade on a final exam. Then they must continue to seek educational opportunities by receiving 15 CEU's every three years.

The program seems to be quite popular. In six years, 135 tree wardens and deputy tree wardens have successfully completed this program with 73 cities and towns (out of a possible 169) having been represented. By taking the course, Connecticut tree wardens have obtained and demonstrated a baseline of skill and knowledge from which they can expand their education. Their communities benefit as well.


Robert M. Ricard is an extension educator in urban and community forestry with the University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System and is founder of the Tree Wardens' Association of Connecticut, Inc.