TOWN TREE WARDENS
By Robert M. Ricard, UConn Extension Urban Forester

As the Extension Urban Forester I am often asked, “Are there any Connecticut state laws that give trees standing,” meaning rights? The answer is, at least in part, yes.

Connecticut is one of the few states in which state law requires that, within 30 days of being elected, the chief elected official of the municipality must appoint a town or borough tree warden. In addition, the tree warden may appoint any number of deputies as he or she deems expedient.

One might ask, “Well that’s nice, but isn’t the position of tree warden an archaic throw-back to colonial days of fence viewers and boundary trees?” The answer to that question depends on many factors. And it may, in fact, depend mostly on citizens like you. Most people have never heard of a municipal tree warden let alone understood their powers and duties. The effect is that the level to which a town government carries out the tree warden law depends on the level shown and voiced by town citizens.

Once appointed, the tree warden is guided, in part, by Section 23-58, -59, and 16-234 of the Connecticut General Statutes. The following are some of the powers and duties of Connecticut’s tree wardens.

- Care for and control all trees in whole or in part within the limits of any public road or grounds and within the limits of the tree warden’s town, except those along highways or in public parks unless so requested by local park commissioners.
- Enforce all provisions of law for the preservation of trees and shrubs and roadside beauty.
- Care for and control parts of trees that extend or overhang the limits of any public road or grounds.
- Remove or cause to be removed, all illegally erected signs on trees under the tree warden’s jurisdiction.
- Post suitable notice on any tree scheduled to be removed or pruned at least five days prior to removal or pruning unless the condition of the tree constitutes an immediate public hazard.
- Hold a public hearing after giving reasonable notice to all known interested parties and post a notice if any person, firm or corporation appeals in writing objecting to the removal or pruning of any tree that the tree warden has posted.

Another question I often get is, “What qualifies a person to be a tree warden?” The statutes don’t require any specific educational or professional qualifications. And no continuing education is required. This is a major issue related to the tree warden statute and one that urban and community forestry activists will probably want to address.

Your municipal tree warden should be, and usually is, an active and effective member of your community’s tree management program. It may be up to the private citizens to help assure that the position is filled by a qualified, caring individual.

A TOWN FOREST

The Town of Westbrook officially dedicated its 55-acre town forest on November 27, 1993. Tom O’Dell, chairman of the Westbrook Conservation Commission and president of the Connecticut Association of Conservation and Inland Wetland Commissions, is credited with the establishment of the forest as well as the establishment of the Westbrook Forest Commission under the provisions of Section 7-131 of the General Statutes.

The town forest is located near Westbrook’s Middle-High School and recycling center. Westbrook’s Conservation Commission obtained a Ford Foundation grant in 1972 to conduct a natural resource inventory on the property and establish a trail system. The trail system was developed with the objective of making the forest accessible to everyone. A free trail map of the Westbrook town forest is available from the Westbrook town hall and library and at major trailheads.

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