Ash Tree Awareness Week Celebrates an Original Vermonter
By Caitlin Cusack, UVM Community Forestry Outreach Coordinator

If you take a walk in Montpelier's Hubbard Park you will likely come upon a tree with a purple ribbon and tag prompting you to consider, "What is this ash tree worth to you?"

During the week of April 27 to May 3, Vermonters will be considering this question as we celebrate the valuable contributions made by our ash trees, which go by the Latin name "*Fraxinus*." The goal of the initiative is to educate people about the threat posed to all species of ash native to Vermont by an exotic pest, the emerald ash borer.

A healthy ash tree in Rutland, VT

The emerald ash borer has feasted on over 100 million ash trees in the Midwest, where it was first discovered in 2002. Unless treated with insecticides, most infested trees die within 2 to 4 years. Experience in Michigan and other states has shown that once this pest is detected in an area, more detections follow quickly — and the ash trees die rapidly over a few short years.

So far, the insect has not turned up in Vermont — despite intensive efforts to find it, including thousands of purple traps hung in trees throughout the state the past few summers by the USDA and Agency of Agriculture, and the efforts of concerned citizens paying special attention to unusual green insects.

That's the good news. The bad news is that the emerald ash borer has been detected in all of the states and provinces surrounding Vermont. In these places, local residents have been the first to find many infestations. Such early detection is critical because it allows more time for developing and implementing control measures.

That's why Vermont's Forest Pest First Detector Program was developed. A partnership between the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, the University of Vermont Extension and other state and federal agencies, the pest detector program offers free training for anyone interested in becoming a certified First Detector of the emerald ash borer and other invasive tree pests.

Because ash trees grow quickly and are tolerant to salt, they have been widely planted across the United States to replace landscape elms decimated by Dutch elm disease. In Vermont, white, green and black ash trees are considered an original native species. Statewide they number over 160 million. These trees represent an important component of the northern hardwood forest and other upland and wetland communities.

The population of ash trees in Montpelier is fairly typical. Montpelier resident John Akielaszek, a member of the local tree board and a Forest Pest First Detector, recently worked with a group of volunteers to inventory over 600 ash trees in Hubbard Park and more than 500 ash trees planted along Montpelier's streets. Hundreds more dot Montpelier residents' landscapes and wooded backyards. Sadly, the survival of these trees is now threatened.

Volunteer Forest Pest First Detector Jordan Fletcher warns, "I love trees — and what's coming is a big deal. Our biome is going to change in significant ways."

All ash trees are at risk and can potentially pose a hazard to public safety when they die. And prepared or not, Vermont communities will likely have to deal with a large number of hazardous trees within a short time

frame. Some towns, including Middlebury, Montpelier, Hartford, Johnson, Brattleboro and South Burlington, have started the planning process.

It will cost Hartford an estimated $105,000 to remove and replace its village ash trees and $330,000 to remove large roadside ash. These trees provide residents roughly $241,171 annually in environmental benefits, and their loss has significant economic, environmental, social and legal ramifications.

Because 80 percent of new infestations originate in or around campgrounds, residents and visitors are urged to buy and use only local firewood. If we can slow the rate of ash mortality, we can buy time to save high-value ash trees and develop more options for managing the spread of the emerald ash borer.

As a member of the Pootatuck band of the Paugussett Nation, volunteer First Detector Little Tree considers himself a custodian of the earth and feels responsible for helping his town. "I'm concerned about invasives taking over. Emerald ash borers wiping out ash is scary. Early detection and early steps to keep these at bay are best. Education is key."

Vermont's significant population of ash trees provides many benefits that are often taken for granted. They filter air pollutants, reduce stormwater runoff, sequester carbon, increase property values and reduce costs associated with heating and cooling.

The quantifiable benefits of a 12-inch diameter ash tree are estimated at $131 annually. Ash trees represent a valuable resource for wood products — baseball bats, tool handles, firewood, black ash baskets — and also for wildlife, water quality, shade and beauty. Losses to the ash products industry in the eastern United States alone are estimated at $25 billion. In addition, results from a recent study suggest that loss of trees to the emerald ash borer increased human mortality related to cardiovascular and lower-respiratory-tract illness.

Akielaszek says, "I hope that this week will provide a necessary boost in terms of public awareness of ash trees on Montpelier's streets, in our parks and in our backyards and will make residents partners in keeping an eye on these beautiful trees to enable early detection of the emerald ash borers when they inevitably arrive."

Ash tree awareness week is hosted by UVM Extension, the VT Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation; VT Agency of Agriculture; APHIS; US Forest Service; and VT Forest Pest First Detectors.

What you can do to save our ash trees

Learn more about Ash Tree Awareness Week in Vermont http://www.vtinvasives.org/ashawarenessweek

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Become a Forest Pest First Detector. Upcoming trainings will be held on May 17 and June 7. Contact Caitlin Cusack 656-7746 or Caitlin.cusack@uvm.edu for more information.