

## Answer Man Tracks Roots Of NIH Tree to Greece

By John Kelly  
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*My granddaughter Colette and I would love to know the name and age of the magnificent ancient tree on the grounds of the NIH National Medical Library with the tag number 5014. Any history on the tree would be much appreciated. We love to visit this tree often and have taken many pictures during the seasons.*

-- Alice Lyons, [Bethesda](#)

There are more than 8,000 trees with a diameter of more than one inch on the 320-acre [National Institutes of Health](#) campus, representing some 158 species. Each tree is entered into the computer with its precise GPS coordinates. So it was easy for the NIH chief groundskeeper, Lynn Mueller, to report that the tree in question is a Chinese mulberry.

"Even though it's a large tree, it's probably no more than 70 years old," said Lynn. An invasive species, it's doubtful the Chinese mulberry (or *Morus alba*) was planted on purpose. "It was probably a volunteer that grew along the old fairway of the Town and Country Golf Course. At one time, the clubhouse sat on the site of the National Library of Medicine, up on that hill. Even today you can see some of the tee boxes between Woodmont Avenue and [Rockville](#) Pike."

Tree No. 5014 is a pretty good-size tree, with an 80-inch diameter trunk. But it's splitting in half -- "literally pulling itself apart," said Lynn -- and it won't be saved.

"We haven't done any heroic efforts to save it, because it's an Asian invasive," he said. "When it goes, it will just be cut up."

That's not the case with one of the gems of the NIH collection, a *Platanus orientalis* -- Oriental plane tree -- known as the "Tree of Hippocrates." The Greek ambassador planted it near the National Library of Medicine in 1961, using a cutting from a tree on the Greek island of Kos, under which the father of medicine is said to have taught students.

Two other Kos trees were planted on the grounds as backups. "Apparently they're gone," Lynn said. "Lawn mowers got them or whatever. . . . This one tree has survived and is in okay health."

Okay health, but not perfect health, which is why Lynn took a few cuttings and sent them off to be cloned. "The existing Hippocrates Tree has been in somewhat of a decline for whatever reason," he said. "I want to make sure we have backups just in case some spring it doesn't wake up."

A tree that dies on the grounds is cut down only if it's near a sidewalk, parking lot or building. If it isn't, foresters top it and take the side branches off, leaving a 30- to 40-foot trunk section as a wildlife habitat. As a result, said Lynn, "We've increased the number of woodpeckers and cavity-dwelling species."

Lynn, 59, a registered landscape architect, has worked at NIH for 28 years and has been the chief groundskeeper for 16.

"It's a beautiful place to work," he said. "We are in charge of a very important aspect, and that's the first impression that our employees, and more importantly, the patients get when they enter the grounds here at NIH."

The sickest of the sick are treated there, and the presence of so many stately trees -- the campus is home to five county tree champions and a red buckeye that qualifies as the state champion -- must be soothing. You don't have to be a patient to experience it. Although post-9/11 security is tight, visitors can enter from the South Drive entrance, near the Metro, to take a stroll.