

Transcript

Connor

Well, I'm Connor Price and I'm the NIH Campus Landscape Architect. I work within the Division of Facilities Stewardship (DFS), in the Specialty Branch. I work alongside other architects and engineers in that branch, typically working with those folks on building foundation issues, such as flooding or erosion issues. I also work with the Master Planning Group in the Division of Facilities Planning (DFP) on the broader issues related to campus, that's tree planting or aesthetics of new projects.

Virgil

I see. Well, in the vein of planting and aesthetics and things like that, we were wondering; what is your favorite plant or flower on the NIH Bethesda campus and why? What's the best time of the year to view it?

Connor

Sure. Actually, driving in this morning, I was thinking about how many great cherry blossoms we have on campus. They're spread out around campus and they bloom at different times. That's starting around now all the way until April.

We have Okame Cherry trees (*Prunus 'Okame'*), Kwanzan Cherry trees (*Prunus 'Kanzan'*), which are the most common around the DC Tidal Basin, and Higan Cherry trees (*Prunus subhirtella*). They're mainly concentrated around Building 10 North, Building 41, and the Building 35-37 Complex. Even at the Metro entrance, there's cherry blossoms there as well. They put on a great show from now until April at different times.

Virgil

Okay, so then if we miss the one at the Basin in DC, we could just come here?

Connor

That's right.

Virgil

Interesting! That's cool.

Connor

The Basin's actually under construction right now, they cut down a lot of those cherry blossoms. So you might have to see them [here].

Virgil

Yeah, this might be the exclusive spot for them! That's cool! In that similar vein of interesting plants on campus: what's a very unique plant that we have here? Tell us a little bit about that.

Connor

So we have two [of] what are called [Hippocrates trees](#) (*Platanus orientalis*). One is located at the National Library of Medicine, and one is at the northside of Building 10. It's a really cool story.

The Tree of Hippocrates was a tree on the Greek island of Kos. It's said this tree was where Hippocrates taught his classes, underneath this tree. A cutting of that tree was donated to NIH in 1961. That tree lived until the early 2000s, then NIH made two clones of that tree. Those are now planted at the National Library of Medicine near the Herb Garden. The other one is at Building 10 North. Those are direct clones of the Hippocrates tree in the Greek islands.

Virgil

That's pretty awesome!

Connor

Yeah. That coincides well with the Hippocratic Oath with NIH. They're two very special trees on campus that we try and take good care of.

Virgil

You know when you just walk around campus is a layman I suppose, you don't think that we have all these really neat things, but that's cool to hear!

Connor

Those are Sycamore trees.

Virgil

Do you think those Hippocrates trees have the most history, or would you say a different plant on campus would have the most history?

Connor

I would say those have the most history. The second most important tree I would say on campus is: on Center Drive, it is lined with Elm trees (*Ulmus americana*). There's a storied history with the Elm tree in North America.

That's one of the first trees that settlers planted. A lot of early cities and towns have those trees as the street tree. Then the Dutch Elm Disease came through and wiped out almost all of [the] Elm trees. It changed the way a lot of cities and towns looked, because we lined our streets [almost exclusively] with Elm trees. It really wiped out a lot of those trees.

There was an effort made by the original campus Landscape Architect, Lynn Mueller. [Lynn] planted these Elm trees along Center Drive as an initiative to bring them back. So those are another important tree [group] on campus to take care of.

Virgil

Absolutely. I didn't know that either. This is informative! So, with all these different plants and trees and things, I'm sure not all of them [are] a walk in the park to take care of and manage. Is there a particular plant that's super pesky or tricky to manage?

Connor

Definitely. I work a lot with the grounds contractor on managing many pesky plants, specifically in our natural areas or forested areas on campus. [Those] tend to be on the buffer edges of campus. One plant in particular that's very pesky is the Porcelain Berry vine (*Ampelopsis brevipedunculata*).

That takes over all new tree plantings, and even established trees, in our forest areas. Particularly along the stream is where it's heavily managed, because it'll grow up [the] trees and crowd [them] out from getting any light. It'll kill it that way. It's very,

very aggressive at spreading. They treat it every year. They cut it. They spray it. It comes right back. It's an issue in Rock Creek Park, too; it's pretty prevalent there.

Virgil

So, pardon my ignorance on this, but quick detour question. Can you eat the porcelain berries or... you just can't use them?

Connor

That's actually a really good question. I'm not sure.

Virgil

Oh, okay. I mean that could be a solution!

All

[laughter]

Josh

Is that an invasive species?

Connor

It is, yeah.

Virgil

Classic.

Connor

Classic.

Virgil

Well, you've went through a lot of different plants: Cherry blossoms and Elms, porcelain berries, Hippocrates trees, and I'm quite sure there are other very interesting plants on campus. What is the significance of having this different array of plants on campus? Why do you think that's important?

Connor

Well, certainly planting trees is important, which we do every year on campus. We plant 125 new trees to keep up with trees that die from disease or old age, or from storm damage. That's an initiative that NIH already has in place. That helps with erosion, stormwater capture, even carbon capture. Trees help with that [alongside] adding, aesthetically, a nicer setting for NIH [staff] on campus.

We have also a lot of what are called 'no-mow' zones or natural areas on campus. We even have a butterfly meadow on the north edge of campus which contains a mix of different native plant species. That helps with biodiversity and providing habitat for a lot of native insects. In this area in particular, the meadow is a monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) sanctuary, so that provides a space for those insects to thrive.

Those no-mow zones are helping us cut down on the amount of mowing we're doing on campus, so that's a cost savings [from a] practical approach. It's also reducing the amount of emissions that are coming from the mowers and lawn equipment as well. And again, it's providing that natural aesthetic on campus.

Virgil

Well, this has been super informative. I'll make sure to keep an eye out for plants as I'm going about campus.

Connor

Sure!