

# Phoenix arborist plants hope for more trees



Connie Cone Sexton, The Republic | azcentral.com 10:59 a.m. MST September 2, 2014



(Photo: Pat Shannahan/ The Republic)

The fate of a tree in Phoenix — a tree, that celebrated thing that cleans the air, makes oxygen, casts precious shade in a scorching desert city — hinges on many factors.

The warming climate. The year's rainfall. The sometimes brutal gusts of the monsoon.

And, for 93,000 or so of those trees, their future lies in the hands of one man.

Richard Adkins works in relative obscurity, in a tiny office at the end of a long hallway in a slump-block building in central Phoenix.

But inside that office — and often, outside of it — he determines the future of shade in Phoenix.

He's the city forestry supervisor, usually with the ultimate say on any tree in city parks, on city rights-of-way, street medians and any other city-owned land.

He's spent much of his eight years on the job fighting to keep trees from falling victim to business and neighborhood development, street widening and storm damage — with not a single line item in his budget to pay for replacement trees.

Now, in the same office, he's ramping up the greatest attempt of his career: making notoriously hot Phoenix cooler with a long-term plan for shade.

The office is barely 11 feet square. In it sit mismatched bookcases and a pair of padded metal chairs. In the middle is a heavy, 1950s-era metal desk turned at an angle, for room to squeeze past. That helps when he's rushing in and the phone is ringing.

It's often a resident, complaining about a tree, reporting branches that need pruning. Sometimes it's a city planner calling about a new project. And sometimes — especially in this season — it's someone letting him know about another limb down, another tree at risk.

When that happens, Adkins goes a bit old school — ignoring, for the moment, the computer on the desk. Instead, he quickly scans the collection of maps and charts he has taped to the wall.

He has the layout of the city's major arterial and collector streets by council district; a grid with the names of the 22-member crew he directs, where they're working and what they're doing; and a list of the 65 to 70 pieces of equipment he could send out for a job.

Maybe they'll need a backhoe to dig out a root, or a dump truck to carry away debris, or a grinder to chew down a stump.

For some small jobs, Adkins even opts to do it himself, with the pruning saw or the pole pounder or one of the other tools he keeps tucked near the doorframe in his office.

Adkins smiles. "That's my set," he says in a soft Virginia drawl. "I use them for teaching demonstrations. If I give them to my guys, I might never get them back."

There are plenty of power tools to take on a job, but no.

"I'm more a manual kind of guy," he says. "You get better control and better cuts, and it's much better to use them to teach people."

Teaching people is another part of his job. When you work in a desert city and your job is to run a forest, sometimes you have to start by teaching people to think of trees at all.



Richard Adkins wants to increase the number of trees — and the resulting shade canopy — in Phoenix. Trees can lead to cleaner air, lower temperatures in the summer and bring “a calmness to a community,” he says. (Photo: Pat Shannahan/The Republic)

### Storm casualties

It's a muggy Monday morning in northeast Phoenix when Adkins gets out of his city truck, dons his hard hat and steps through damp grass toward the casualties of the previous week's downpour.

He left his manual tools behind. The destruction at Paradise Cove Park is too great.

"The wind came east to west, so strong it just pulled the entire root plate up out of the ground," he says, pointing to a once 20-foot-tall acacia tree, now 20 feet long on its side.

Adkins walks slowly, stopping to examine each tree in his path, the fallen and those whose limbs were sheared or branches snapped in half.

Two members of his crew, Cuong Dinh and Robert Gallegos, walk alongside as Adkins makes his way to several trees on the east side of the park. They nod, making mental notes; they will later mark trees to be removed.

Adkins stops at a still-standing but battered acacia. It's missing nearly every branch on one side. He stares up at the trunk, where the main limbs divide. "I can see a split and that's a risk," he says. Pruning to clean up the damaged side would leave the tree lopsided, making it susceptible to falling. It's got to go.

After a couple of hours, Adkins sighs. "It looks like we're going to lose about 40 trees, here." That's about 20 percent of the entire park.

It's hard to hear above the din of the heavy equipment at work. Adkins has pulled nearly every member of his crew out to handle the cleanup. A few yards from where he's standing, a bright-orange Kubota tractor picks up a load of brush and a backhoe fights to pull out a root ball. In the distance, a crew member climbs into the aerial lift of a bucket truck to prune a tree top.

As midmorning approaches, Adkins gets back into his truck. He has stops to make at two other nearby parks also hard-hit.

He's back in his office later that afternoon, reflecting on the damage he's seen.

He wouldn't know for a couple more weeks, but by mid-August, the tally of trees lost to this summer's storms would rise to at least 250. Asked where he'll find replacements, Adkins shrugs and says, "That's a good question."

Since taking the job, Adkins has been working to see Phoenix — and the Valley as a whole — **increase the size of the so-called urban-forest footprint. More trees with a larger collective canopy of shade can lead to healthier air.**

"Studies have shown that if you can see trees, it **brings about a calmness to a community.** If you're driving past trees, you slow down. They're a calming device," Adkins explains. **"Trees will curb the urban heat island** to let us walk from Point A to Point B in the summer."

That's why, in his first few years with the city, Adkins and others at the city built a Tree and Shade Master Plan, which was adopted by the Phoenix City Council in 2010. The goal: to more than double the total tree canopy on city land from an average of 11 percent to 25 percent by 2030.

Getting there can feel like a losing battle. "It was an initiative that was unfunded," Adkins says. "I've got to have some more backing. The city is really going to have to take it seriously that **trees are a benefit to all citizens**. They are an important part of our infrastructure."

It hits home during the monsoon.

"And this wasn't particularly a bad summer," Adkins says of the 250 trees lost. Over the years, the losses have mounted to about 12,000 to 13,000.

Losses like those at Paradise Cove may not be completely recovered. Adkins doesn't have a budget where he can pull out money to just go buy 40 more trees.

Sometimes, a specific parks district — like the northeast division where Paradise Cove is — may have room in its budget to buy replacement trees.

Sometimes, Adkins may get a replacement because someone has paid for a memorial tree in honor of a loved one.

But more often than not, Adkins gets trees from Arizona Public Service Co. The electric utility donates trees when it digs up other trees that have grown into power lines. All the city has to do is maintain the tree. Salt River Project has helped Adkins' department by sponsoring planting projects.

There are times when tree purchases are planned. Last year, the city planted 746 trees in public spaces at a cost of about \$220,000. The money came from the Street Department and the Parks Department capital improvement program.

\$300 per tree

But most years, there is no set fund to tap.

And even if money in the budget weren't an issue, Adkins gets multiple calls from residents complaining about the trees that already exist.

"The politics of trees is very strong," he says. "You have a lot of people who want them and a lot who don't. Half the citizens want information about trees or want to identify a tree, and there's the other half that says, 'Cut them all down.' "

He keeps a log book of his calls. There are some common questions:

"Why is this tree here? It's messy."

"Why aren't you doing more pruning?"

He has a few regulars, including a man who contacts Adkins every couple of weeks with a list of trees he believes are dead or doing poorly.

On the days when the complaints and accusations are just too hard to manage, Adkins relies on one of the favorite parts of his office.

On the wall behind his chair is an aeronautical map of Arizona. He lifts one corner and reveals what's hidden behind: a poster of an airplane cockpit. Adkins is a pilot, too.

"For sanity, if things get really bad, I'll turn around and chair-fly," he says and smiles.

### **Money to grow trees**

The quest for a shady Phoenix wasn't always so hard.

During the city's first 70 years, "there was much more of a love affair among citizens for trees," Adkins says.

A push to create an inhabitable environment began soon after Phoenix was settled in 1867. There were annual newspaper articles urging people to plant shade trees.

By the early 1900s, Phoenix was seen as an oasis of green, with lush trees standing tall along canal banks crisscrossing the city. Cottonwoods dug in, drinking water that seeped from the dirt-lined canals.

The city's Tree and Shade Master Plan includes a passage about how the city was once considered a garden of trees and how "the entire Valley from Mesa into Phoenix was one solid mass of green, and every road a perfect avenue."

But by the 1950s, the Valley saw an influx of residents wanting a more modern community.

Streets were widened, sidewalks installed, canals lined with concrete and trees discarded.

Today, only hints of the area's original vegetation remain. Among them, Murphy Bridle Path, which stretches north along Central Avenue from Bethany Home Road in Phoenix.

The topic of shade has been an ongoing conversation for the Downtown Voices Coalition, says Tim Eigo, chairman of the grass-roots organization of Phoenix residents and business leaders. The group supports sustainable development in the city.

"It's always astounding to us why shade isn't folded into every new project," Eigo says. "It just seems obvious." The coalition agrees with the goals of the city's Tree and Shade Master Plan but has not seen much progress. And Eigo is concerned about a lack of funding.

"We're going to need to see some real commitment and progress, and that's going to mean money," Eigo explains. "If there is a citywide campaign for tree and shade, we would expect some firm budget commitment to the plan."

In a statement Aug. 12, Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton said trees are "an important priority, and certainly on the list of things we'd like to do."

He added that the city is "pushing for more trees in the general plan" but the effort has been slowed because of the recession.

Adkins wants more trees, but he's pushing for the right tree in the right spot. It's why he takes extra care in choosing trees for the city.

While choosing trees for a street-improvement project near 35th Avenue and Indian School Road, Adkins pulls a small file from his pocket.

He digs it into the soil of a Red Push pistache. He likes this type because it won't grow too tall and will probably delight drivers in the fall when its leaves turn a deep burgundy.

"I'm looking for the developing root structure," he says. "I want to make sure there is no girdling in the roots at the surface." And he wants to see how deep the roots are in the box. "Deep is bad."

Adkins runs his hands along the branches, looking for evenness in the structure, whether it has oversize branches.

Choosing the proper tree is just the start. Adkins must ensure that trees aren't planted too deep. Otherwise, he explains, "the tree will start to suffocate."

### **A lifelong love**

Adkins, 53, is more than just the Phoenix arborist. He's president of the Arizona Community Tree Council Inc., a non-profit group that works with organizations across the state to promote the care and planting of trees.

"It's a little cliché, but trees are my life," Adkins says. "I grew up loving trees, climbing them and making that my career."

He still explores trees for work and play. He's been known to head out of the office at lunch to go and find a tree to climb. "I'll take a sandwich and find a tree in a park," he says. "It's very relaxing."

He's been called a "tree guru," a "tree dude" and even a "tree hugger."

Adkins doesn't take offense at any of the names, and kind of likes the guru label.

What makes him slightly bristle? Going to a conference of fellow arborists where someone sidles up and asks, "There are trees in Phoenix?"

He's worked in places where finding lots of green wasn't an issue. After graduating with a bachelor's degree from Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va., Adkins worked in New Zealand, helping grow the native pine species. He spent time on the southern plains of Nepal, helping launch a forestry program. He taught people how to grow seedlings and fertilize their crops; along the way, he learned to speak Nepali and some Hindi dialects.

But even in such lush vegetation, Adkins never lost the dream of someday working in Arizona. "I had read a book as a little boy growing up in Virginia that dealt with the desert. I was so intrigued by how you could grow trees in the desert."

Adkins eventually moved to Arizona and took a job as a park ranger at the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in the southern part of the state. After about a year, he moved around, earning his master's degree along the way, before taking a job in the mid-1990s managing a tree-care company.

And then he saw an ad for his current job. One of his first goals was to get to know the city's trees. He wanted an inventory.

He built on his knowledge of the trees that do well in Phoenix: Chinese pistache, Southern live oak, desert ironwood and varieties of mesquite and

paloverde. But he came to realize that certain trees weren't in the right spot. They were too tall for the space or their canopy was too wide. They hit power lines or crowded other trees.

His extensive research on Phoenix and its trees resulted in his somewhat crowded office. Nearly every inch of the four walls is covered by a map, chart or poster. And nearly everything on the bookcases, filing cabinet and desk is tree-related.

Even his 2014 calendar sports "Great Trees of the United States."

There are chunks of trees atop cabinets. One tree stump has an embedded piece of truck, left there by an unfortunate driver.

One of the newest additions to Adkins' office wall is a 3- by 2-foot piece of paper on the east wall. It's labeled: "Southwestern Forests — Air Quality and Beyond."

On it are coordinates of each city tree, part of a U.S. Forest Service study that examined the relationship between a community's urban forest and the impact on the environment. The study compared the tree canopies in four Southwest cities: Phoenix, El Paso, Albuquerque and Las Cruces N.M.

Albuquerque came out on top with the greatest tree canopy at 13.3 percent coverage, beating the 9 percent the study found in Phoenix.

Adkins says the study confirmed what he already knew: More trees can remove more pollution and lower temperatures, dropping down nearly 4½ degrees. "Trees lessen the problems of heat islands," he says. "And that's fantastic."

But there's more, he says. "For Phoenix residents, there is an amazing \$7.8 million of yearly ecological benefit, taking 5 million tons of carbon out of the air."

But it's going to be hard to reach the goal of having 25 percent tree-canopy coverage on city-owned land when trees on that land keep coming down and not going up, Adkins says.

He's hoping the Forest Service study can help jump-start the city's plan for more shade. Posters and other publicity materials on the study's results are expected to debut to the public sometime in September as a "Growing a Healthy Community" campaign with the aim to get more people excited about the need for trees.

### **New growth**

On a recent Thursday, Adkins heads from his office to the 14th Floor at City Hall for a meeting with Philip McNeely, the city's environmental-programs manager. In his arms are brochures and posters to highlight the upcoming campaign.

They sit across from one another in a conference room.

McNeely is preparing for a trip to a sustainability conference in Houston and wanted background on what Adkins' department is doing to help Phoenix.

"The idea is not to reinvent the wheel, if someone has a good idea," he tells Adkins.

For the next hour, Adkins talks about ongoing projects, including the 2010 Tree and Shade Master Plan. He shares how he has created a "Citizen Forester" program, helping residents learn about the care of trees. And he talks about the new study, how its results may help persuade people to support increased tree plantings to reach the city's shade-canopy goal.

Adkins spreads open a "Growing a Healthy Community" poster and McNeely reaches across the table to grab a brochure. He asks, "How do you make sure you have a diverse set of trees so they don't all die from the same thing?"

"That's my job," Adkins says with excitement. "We've got 143 different species, just within the city."

McNeely shakes his head. "That's amazing."

Adkins says he's created a page on the city's website where people can find information on each tree in the city. "There's information on there that only nerds like me are keen on."

McNeely's enthusiasm has Adkins grinning.

After the meeting, Adkins stops to check on more damage from recent storms, and then it's back to his office with its angled desk and overflowing bookcases.

On one, he keeps Dr. Seuss' "The Lorax." He has two hardback copies, actually, and an audio version.

It has been a favorite ever since his university days. He used to read the book to classes of grad students.

In the book, a little boy learns of a town once filled with trees. But progress came, and soon, the trees were gone.

"The students would roll their eyes and I could see them think: 'Really. This guy is going to read "The Lorax" to us?' But halfway through, everybody's engaged and by the end, they're in tears."

Adkins used to read the book aloud to children on school visits as part of his department's urban forestry education program. But the program, which paid for a staff member, supplies and information materials, was cut from the budget about 6½ years ago.

"I would love to go out and do it again, someday," Adkins says.

He knows an idea, like a seedling, has to start small.

Read or Share this story: <http://azc.cc/1u0Bmha>

#### **MORE STORIES**



**Phoenix-area roadway closures this weekend (/story/news/local/phoenix/2014/08/07/phoenix-bumper-to-bumper-traffic/13747781/)**

[\(/story/news/local/phoenix](#)

Jan. 16, 2015, 8:52 a.m.

**Was MLK holiday better when**

[/2014/08/07/phoenix-bumper-to-bumper-traffic/13747781/](#)



**there was no holiday?**  
[\(/story/ejmontini/2015/01/16/martin-luther-king-jr-holiday-arizona-evan-mecham/21827665/\)](#)  
Jan. 16, 2015, 9:49 a.m.



**Running in P.F. Chang's? Experts offer marathon tips**  
[\(/story/entertainment/events/2015/01/16/running-pf-changs-experts-offer-marathon-tips/21722645/\)](#)  
Jan. 16, 2015, 11 a.m.

[/entertainment/events/2015/01/16/running-pf-changs-experts-offer-marathon-tips/21722645/](#)

## Quotes on Tree Trimming

[tree-service.homeadvisor.com](http://tree-service.homeadvisor.com)

Find Tree Trimming Contractors Now. Fast & Free. Enter Your Zip Code!