

American elm the focus of new Paradise Creek project

By DAVID MACAULAY
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Pictured are Yolima Carr, Conservation Landscape Curator with the Elizabeth River Project and environmental educator Larry LaPell at the Great American Elm Tree. (David Macaulay/Freelance) (The Virginian-Pilot)

Nearly two decades since work began to reclaim 40 polluted acres beside the Elizabeth River for what would become Portsmouth's newest park, Paradise Creek Nature Park continues to reveal its secrets.

One of the park's most recent discoveries is a large American elm tree. A group of senior volunteers — dubbed the "A-Team" after the 1980s action-adventure TV series — found the rare tree as they were clearing invasive plants in the park, according to Yolima Carr, conservation landscape curator with the Elizabeth River Project.

“As we were moving invasives, I saw this huge tree. All of this was overgrown,” she said, pointing to a recently cleared area close to the Fox Trail.

According to Carr, the elm is about 100 to 125 years old, making it one of the most historic trees in the park.

The area is now being cleaned up and transformed into a garden around the tree, thanks to \$1,450 in donations from the Elizabeth River Garden Club and the Portsmouth Master Gardeners.

It’s just the latest initiative by the Elizabeth River Project, a nonprofit that bought the park in 2008, transformed it and recently handed it over to the city of Portsmouth.

Carr said mature American elm trees are now fairly rare. The trees once graced the thoroughfares of many towns and cities in the Eastern United States, but many were wiped out by Dutch elm disease caused by an East Asian fungus. The arrival of the European elm bark beetle in the early 20th century caused further devastation, according to the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food and Environment.

Carr leads teams of volunteers in planting pollinators and removing invasive species. The volunteers work for three hours every Thursday at Paradise Creek.

The team found four ceramic toilets under the elm tree, a reminder of the days when Paradise Creek was used as a dump site, Carr said. They regularly find items including car parts, remains of mattresses and roofing at the park.

Since 2001, the Elizabeth River Project and its community partners have completed more than 20 projects to improve Paradise Creek, a 2-mile finger of water polluted by multiple superfund sites, which are locations identified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as severely contaminated by hazardous substances and requiring substantial cleanup.

As for the Great American Elm Garden Project, Carr envisions a tranquil garden with shade-tolerant plants around the tree once the project is complete. Members of the Elizabeth River Garden Club, who donated \$1,200, and the Portsmouth Master Gardeners, who donated \$250, visited the site in October.

“We are going to schedule three days in November for the ladies to plant the gardens,” Carr said.

The Master Gardeners, the A-Team and youth conservation volunteer interns will help maintain the new garden, which should be completed by spring.

“It’s easy to plant a garden, but the difficult part is maintenance,” she said.

The project dovetails with a tree-planting project funded by a Virginia Trees for Clean Water grant for 40 native trees such as pines and sassafras at the park. Carr is also overseeing new trails to take visitors to other trees at Paradise Creek.

“We have about five more beautiful, humongous trees that we want to connect to trails,” she said.

Paradise Creek Nature Park is the focus of many educational programs in Portsmouth. Larry LaPell, an environmental educator with the Elizabeth River Project, said the elm provides another learning opportunity.

“It’s really about making a connection with the kids and getting them to come and get their hands on it and make that physical connection with the tree. So many kids are from an urban environment, and they don’t get out to come into the woods and play and explore,” LaPell said.

David Macaulay, maccazi17@hotmail.com

Correction: An earlier version of this story included the incorrect information that the Port Authority had used Paradise Creek as a dumping site.

Topics: portsmouth, Paradise Creek Nature Park, American elm, tree, Elizabeth River Project