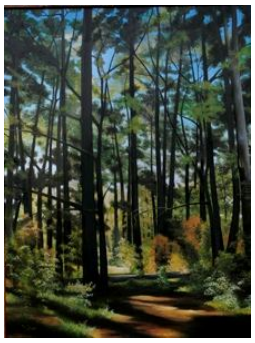

Friends of the West 11th Street Park e-cology Newsletter

Issue 13 **Spring 2009**

Exotic species in the park: What's the problem?

by Lorraine Cherry

In every park in Houston, including West 11th Street, invasion by exotic (ie, non-native) species is a problem that takes time, money, and effort to keep in check. Why is it a problem? Why not just let anything grow out there that happens to take root?

In a natural area like West 11th Street Park, there are limited resources (water, space, soil nutrients) for plants to grow. If one type of plant grows especially well, it will take resources from other plants that do not grow as well. Unfortunately, the very characteristics that make plants attractive to home gardeners—fast growing, resistant to pests, minimal care, disease-resistant—make non-native plants a danger to the natural habitat. In a park like ours that is surrounded by residential landscaping, the likelihood of plants from people's yards seeding into the park is pretty high.

A classic example of invasion by a non-native species is the Chinese tallow tree. This tree is native to eastern Asia, but was introduced in the southern United States during colonial times. Since then it has spread throughout the south, totally overgrowing some areas. It is a very fast-growing tree that is drought-resistant. Because of this, and because it has attractive red or yellow color in the fall, it has frequently been used for landscaping. Tallow trees seed in naturally and spread easily, so they can quickly take over an ecosystem. Here in Houston, the Chinese tallow is the most common type of tree, accounting for 23% of all trees in the urban forest. This compares with 19% for loblolly pines and 15% for oak species.

Chinese tallow leaves

Another characteristic of Chinese tallow trees that contributes to their ability to spread rapidly is that animals, birds, and insects that eat other plants tend to avoid eating tallow. This is apparently a question of preference, rather than avoiding toxins. This brings up a second important reason to eliminate exotic species: living things within an ecosystem evolve together. The animals, birds, and insects that are accustomed to living with a native plant can be driven out along with the plant if an exotic species takes its place.

Removing exotic species from West 11th Street is an ongoing project. According to a tree inventory that was done last summer by interns from the Parks and Recreation Department, the amount of non-native species in the park is surprisingly low, about 6% of the total number of trees, and we want to keep it that way! In addition to Chinese tallow, we make a special effort to remove Chinese privet, waxleaf *Ligustrum*, *Nandina*, and tree of heaven, in addition to some other less common exotics.

We will be out in the park later this month to work on this project. If you would like to come out and help, contact us at the email address at the end of this newsletter for more information.

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Exploring…

By Candy Donahue

Well, if you've been to the park with your child since the hurricane, you've certainly noticed the "destruction." And you might have talked about all the trees that are lying about and how "messy" it looks. And you might have wondered when or if it was going to get "cleaned up." Next time you're in the park together, imagine you are a bird or an insect or a rabbit. Insects will feast on the logs and begin the decomposition process and birds will feast on these insects. The dead trees that are still standing will make wonderful bird homes. As limbs and leaves and pine needles pile up against and among the fallen trees and their branches, shelter for small animals will develop. Notice all the holes in the ground where the tree roots once were. Then remember how dry it has been and how difficult it might be for a small animal to find water. The park is now full of little reservoirs. So "destruction" and "messy" are only our initial human perception.

I imagined I had a small companion last weekend as I entered the park near the sign on Shelterwood and made a counter-clockwise loop. Our imaginary adventure is below. You don't have to take my same path, of course, but just in case you want to try and find something specific, I'll give you enough clues. I encourage you to take a similar walk and just have fun exploring and wondering.

> In the northeast corner we saw two big pine trees that had fallen over nearly side by side. One of them has an amazingly, tortuously twisted trunk. We looked at the wood beneath the bark and saw how twisted and torn it is. It must take a really strong wind to do that! Then we looked at the pine tree next to it and noticed that instead of being twisted around and over, it was ripped out of the ground by the roots. We squatted down and REALLY looked at the root ball of this tree. Pine trees have strong central tap roots that *usually* keep them from being uprooted as many of ours were. We talked about the big roots in the center and smaller ones radiating at the edges. Do all the other root balls look kind of like this one? Who might drink out of this water hole?

Broken pine tree with twisted trunk

Uprooted pine tree with tap roots

We headed west and saw some standing dead trees—trees that died before Ike, but we hadn't seen them before because there were so many branches and leaves in the way. Today we saw the kinds of bird homes that dead trees provide.

Tree rings on a fallen tree at the northeast corner of the park. This is visible from the street on the Shelterwood side of the park.

Did you know that you can estimate the age of a tree by counting its rings? There are plenty of opportunities to count tree rings out in the park, because many of the cross-sawn tree trunks have been left in the park to decompose. Trees add a ring each year, each ring having a light part added in the spring/summer and a dark part added in the fall/winter. Generally, plenty of rain means wide rings and drought means narrow rings. About how old are these big trees in the park? We decided at least as old as grandma!

After turning south, we saw a *really* old log off the trail to the right. We got a stick and poked around on the log and bits of it easily broke off. We saw trails insects had made in the wood. This log had been there so long we could pick up handfuls of the crumbling wood. It smelled sort of like damp soil—because that's what dead trees *do*—they turn back into rich soil for plants to grow in. That's one of the reasons all the trees the hurricane knocked down will be left here in the park where they fell.

We passed the ball field and turned the southwest corner, and saw a very big oak tree with sprawling branches down on the ground (it's directly inside the park off 11th Street by the sewer cover). We looked at the root ball of *this* big tree. Where were the big roots coming from the middle of the bottom of the tree? There weren't any! Oak trees don't have tap roots like pine trees, and their wide flat leaves hold water and get heavier than pine needles, so they usually get uprooted more easily than pine trees. Then we looked up at the sky and saw the big "hole" that has opened up in the forest canopy. A lot more sun is going to reach the ground now. Different kinds of plants that couldn't grow well in the shade might grow here now. This tree had lots of branches and it looks like they might make really nice animal shelters in the months to come.

Roots of a fallen oak tree

As we kept walking and were about to leave, we noticed the white flowers on the plants along the trail's edge. That means dewberries on a later visit!

If you read the article in the last newsletter about adopting a tree, pick a leaf from your tree now and compare it to another leaf later in the year. Put your leaf between some layers of newspaper and put that under a heavy book. In about a week you will have a nice flat dry leaf you can save for later. Sometimes these "baby" leaves look very different from the older ones in the summer, even though they are from the same tree. Notice how soft and bright green all the young leaves in the park are compared to the older tougher leaves that didn't fall off the trees during the winter.

It's a good idea to stay on the trails when you go to the park. If there is something that you especially want to take a look at that is off the trail, watch where you put your feet. This is for your protection and the protection of the park resources—too much off-trail traffic will degrade the habitat value of the park for the living things that make their home there.

If you decide to leave the trail, remember that this is a wild area. Make sure you know what poison ivy looks like so you can avoid it, and watch for snakes. Do not leave the trail without showing your child the safe way to do so. Nature is not "out to get us," but we do need to be smart.

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Friends of Mandell Park Hosts 3rd Annual Plant Sale

(Our sister organization, Friends of Mandell Park, asked us to spread the word about their upcoming plant sale!)

The Friends of Mandell Park (FOMP) will host their third annual spring fundraiser with a plant sale **9 am to 1 pm on Saturday, April 4, 2009**, at Mandell Park, which is located at 1501 Richmond Avenue at Mandell Street in the Museum District. All proceeds from the sale will benefit the development of Mandell Park, a neighborhood "pocket park."

The sale will offer all varieties of plants—flowers, divided plants, cuttings, seedlings, tubers, and bulbs as well as potted trees and plants. Additional activities include a raffle, refreshments, community garden tours, and a Children's Corner with special activities for children in the garden. Meredith Garden volunteers will be on hand to answer plant and gardening questions and discuss community gardens.

For more information, contact:

Plant Sale Chair, Karen Anne Vinson 713-398-0474 karenannevinson@sbcglobal.net
or
FOMP President, Skip Almoney 713-524-4285 FoMandellPark@aol.com
or
Board Member, Janet Neath 713-960-8058 jjneath@sbcglobal.net

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In closing, we wanted to share with you a lovely view of the park at sunset, taken just last month:

Until next time, see you in the park!

Friends of the West 11th Street Park

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Our vision: "This land shall be preserved forever as a natural habitat. Future amenities and improvements will be designed to promote conservation and the appreciation and enjoyment of nature."

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www.west11thstreetpark.org