foresters find niche in paved paradises

By Ruth Bobbitt, Lamont, Okla.

Oklahoma State harvests a unique breed of foresters who help urban communities get back to their roots—literally.

People often give Carrie Tomlinson puzzled looks when she tells them what she does for a living. Indeed, it may seem unlikely that a forester lives and works in a suburban Oklahoma community.

However, forests abound in urban environments, said Tomlinson, who is the urban forester for Edmond, Okla.

"Urban forests are a combination of natural tree cover and urban landscape tree cover that make up the city's canopy," Tomlinson said. "Although natural forests are an important aspect of community forestry, urban forests are not natural in their entirety."

Tomlinson said her seemingly contradictory job title represents a position many cities have come to regard as fundamental to the advancement of urban infrastructure. She said trees provide "green infrastructure," a natural system that supports native species, maintains natural ecological processes, provides noise reduction, sustains air and water resources, and contributes to the health and quality of life for America's communities and people.

"You can't create a machine that does everything a tree does," Tomlinson said. "The intrinsic value of trees is a value system I promote so we can have those things."

Although the concept of conserving and maintaining trees in urban settings is not new, the specialized field of urban and community forestry has experienced significant growth in the past decade, said Tom Hennessey, Oklahoma State University forestry professor and interim head for the newly established OSU Department of Natural Resource Ecology and Management.

trees and people

In 2003, what was then the OSU Department of Forestry recognized the growing popularity of urban forestry as an area of specialization and established an "urban and community forestry" option under the forestry major.

"Although we didn't have it formalized as a program, students have been taking the classes to prepare themselves for careers as urban foresters for years," Hennessey said. "We saw a need to offer students an opportunity to prepare for a professional career working with trees and people in the urban and community context."

Hennessey said much of an urban forester's job relates directly to trees, but much more of it relates to people.

"Urban foresters deal with trees in a context of people and the environment they live in," he said.

Therefore, it is not surprising students who pursue this option are usually interested in working with both trees and people. Of the 60 students currently majoring in forestry at OSU, six have declared urban and community forestry as their area of focus, Hennessey said.

Amber Fritchie of Lee's Summit, Mo., is one such student. Fritchie is a senior who transferred to OSU in 2004 to pursue urban and community forestry.

"[At my previous university], I chose to take a class about native Missouri plants," she said. "I absolutely loved the class and knew I had to find a school where I could pursue more classes about trees."

Fritchie found OSU.

In addition to core courses in forestry and natural resource management; written and verbal communications; history; social sciences; math and natural sciences, Fritchie's coursework includes a broad foundation in landscape materials and design, arboriculture, horticulture, entomology, plant pathology and geography.

The urban and community forestry curriculum also allows students to tailor part of their program to reflect personal interests through controlled electives in geographic information systems, urban planning, recreation, governmental law and administration.

As a capstone course for this option, students complete an internship in urban forestry under the guidance of a faculty mentor.

many options

Students who complete the requirements for a major option in urban and community forestry have many career options available to them.

"Urban forestry is the fastest-growing segment in the whole discipline of forestry," Hennessey said. "Communities are recognizing the values of planting and maintaining trees in their communities and the values the trees provide."

Seven Oklahoma cities – Bartlesville, Edmond, Midwest City, Muskogee, Norman, Stillwater and Tulsa – have made a formal commitment to maintain their urban forests by employing urban foresters.

In addition to working for a municipality, urban foresters also may find employment opportunities within public utility companies or consulting firms.

"I am still deciding exactly what I want to do with urban forestry," Fritchie said. "I might like to try being a city forester, or maybe do consulting. Ultimately, I would really like to have my own consulting company that could help businesses and others decide what kind of trees to plant, where to plant them, how to protect the trees they already have and make decisions about pruning and disease management.

"Because I take all the traditional forestry classes, I would still be able to pursue a more traditional forestry career if I chose to later on," said Fritchie, describing the benefits of her area of study.

Students who choose "traditional" forestry will be affected by urban forestry during their career, said Mark Bays, urban forestry coordinator for the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry and a 1982 OSU forestry alumnus.

"Even if [foresters] choose to stay in forestry in a traditional sense, they should realize all forests that we have in this county have an urban impact by people going out and impacting the forest," Bays said.

Bays himself worked as a traditional forester before joining ODA in 1992.

"Trees are just something I have a real passion for," he said. "I guess you can say I developed my passion for trees through Boy Scouts."

That passion led Bays to a career planting, protecting and maintaining trees.

diverse tasks

In Bays' 24 years as a forester, he has planted, protected and maintained trees in a wide range of settings.

Bays has played an integral role in both the preservation of the "Survivor Tree" at the Oklahoma City National Memorial and in the protection of the historic trees surrounding the Oklahoma Capitol during the construction of its dome.

Yet, the majority of Bays' time is spent working alongside other urban foresters like Tomlinson.

Tomlinson received her bachelor's degree in forestry from OSU in 1996 and her master's degree in 1999. She worked as the urban forester in Stillwater from 1996 to 2002, when she took a job as the urban forester in Edmond.

Her most recent project has been a $2.2 million renovation of a six-block streetscape in the downtown Edmond shopping district.

To complete projects like the downtown streetscape, Tomlinson often works with horticulturalists, arborists and landscape architects.

"While landscape architects or horticulturalists work with similar types of projects, they may only look at a single tree or trees in a confined area," she said. "Urban foresters look at the entire city to meet the larger goal of getting a healthy city canopy."

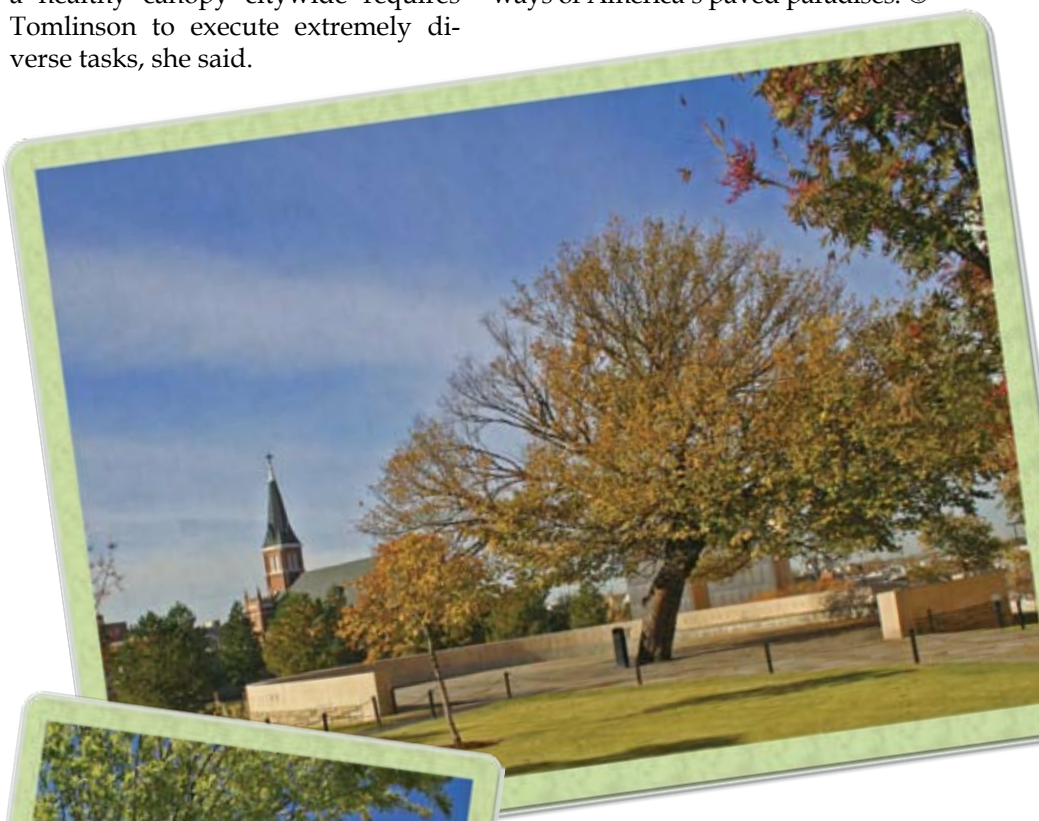
Tackling the goal of achieving a healthy canopy citywide requires Tomlinson to execute extremely diverse tasks, she said.

"Any day, I could be out in the field looking at a tree, in the office writing a grant application or talking to city councilmen about a project," she said.

The diversity of Tomlinson's job is matched only by its endurance.

"The most fun part of my job is that I can go back and see the fruition of my work over my lifetime," Tomlinson said. "Other people's work may be fleeting, but I can go back with my grandchildren and see trees I planted."

Others also will enjoy the benefits of Tomlison's work for years to come. It is because of the work of urban foresters that there are living, growing forests whose canopies are intertwined with the parking lots, skyscrapers and roadways of America's paved paradises.



Urban forestry elements such as the "Survivor Tree" at the Oklahoma City National Memorial (above) and streetscapes like this one in downtown Edmond provide "green infrastructure" that supports native species, maintains natural ecological processes, provides noise reduction, sustains air and water resources, and contributes to the health and quality of life for America's communities and people. (Photos and artwork by Ruth Bobbitt)