

Nature in the Neighborhood – June 2024

Swampscott Memorial Arboretum

This past Memorial Day weekend, on the lawn of the Swampscott Town Hall, there was a rededication ceremony of Swampscott's Memorial Arboretum. Many, including myself, did not know that the town had a Memorial Arboretum. The only hint would be the presence of a few inconspicuous bronze plaques on the ground, like the ones at the base of the Fernleaf Beech next to the Post Office and the large Horse Chestnut at the corner of Burrill Street and Monument Avenue.

The first mention of the Arboretum was in a 1945 Town Report that listed the donation of 43 trees, including the species, the donors, and the person in whose memory they were planted. Many had been donated for the men who served during World War II, such as the Sourwood that was planted (and is still standing) in memory of Gershon Ross, PFC for the Army. He was killed in action at Leyte Island in the Philippine Islands on October 20, 1944.

More than 1,300 Swampscott residents honorably served in World War II. Fifty of them did not come home. Among these were Gershon Ross and the two friends with whom he had played high school football: Blaine Kehoe and George Foster. Blaine Kehoe, corporal for the US Marine Corps, First Division, and Gold Star recipient, was killed in action at Cape Gloucester in the Solomon Islands. George Foster, an ensign in the Navy, was killed when his patrol blimp crashed in the Gulf of Mexico on April 16, 1944.

Over the years, other trees were donated and planted at the Memorial Arboretum in memory of family and friends. It is not unusual for a tree to be planted as a tribute to a loved one given that, throughout history and across continents, people have had a special relationship with trees.

Many cultures around the world regard certain trees as sacred. So it has been for the Buddhists and the Bodhi tree, the Hindus and the Banyan tree, and the ancient European Druids and the Oak. Many African cultures revere the Baobab tree, and, for the peoples of the Central and South American rainforests, it is the Kapok tree. The Giant Sequoia is an important symbol for Native American tribes and the Ginkgo for the Chinese. And, starting in ancient Greece and Rome, up through biblical times to the present, the Olive tree has held a special place in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern traditions and Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions, symbolizing, above all, peace.

For many cultures, trees have signified the connection between the heavens and the earth and so are a fitting way to honor someone's memory, as illustrated by Swampscott's Memorial Arboretum.

But it is not just for their symbolism that trees are a fitting way to pay tribute to the memory of loved ones. Trees provide environmental benefits for the living that will

continue for generations to come. They clean the air and soil and provide cooling shade. They combat climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide. They are a source of food and are a naturally renewable, sustainable building material. They offer habitat for wildlife and increase the property values of our own habitat – our homes. They contribute to our physical and mental health and well-being. They even give us the very air we breathe.

This should provide reason to do all we can to protect the trees we have and to add to their number. Yet, just the opposite is occurring.

A recent study revealed that, in a relatively short period, there had been a considerable decrease in Swampscott's tree canopy, and not just in areas of increased development. swampscottma.gov/tree-committee/pages/tree-canopy-study. It is more than likely that similar significant tree canopy loss is happening in other communities as well.

Today there are 29 trees in Swampscott's Memorial Arboretum; 18 are original trees from 1945, and 10 have bronze plaques. A pile of additional plaques was serendipitously found in the basement of the Town Hall carriage house after it was accidentally damaged in 2021. What led to the loss of the trees these plaques once marked is not fully known, but the Town, through its Tree Committee, hopes that individuals will come forward to donate trees for these plaques. Information on donating trees can be found at swampscottma.gov/forestry-division/pages/tree-gift-fund. To find out more about the Memorial Arboretum, including viewing photos of the plaques, visit: rich9364.wixsite.com/vetsarboretum. Coming soon to the website will also be a map and inventory of the existing trees.

At the recent Memorial Arboretum rededication, we learned that Gershon Ross, Blaine Kehoe, and George Foster, the three young men who sacrificed their lives to protect democracy in War World II, were featured in a 1945 book entitled, "Three Pals." The message that ends the book proves especially relevant today: "The three pals will never meet on earth again, but they have done their job gallantly and well; And their spirits mingle as in days of old, Catholic, Protestant and Jew ... They died, as they lived, in true brotherhood, Americans all."