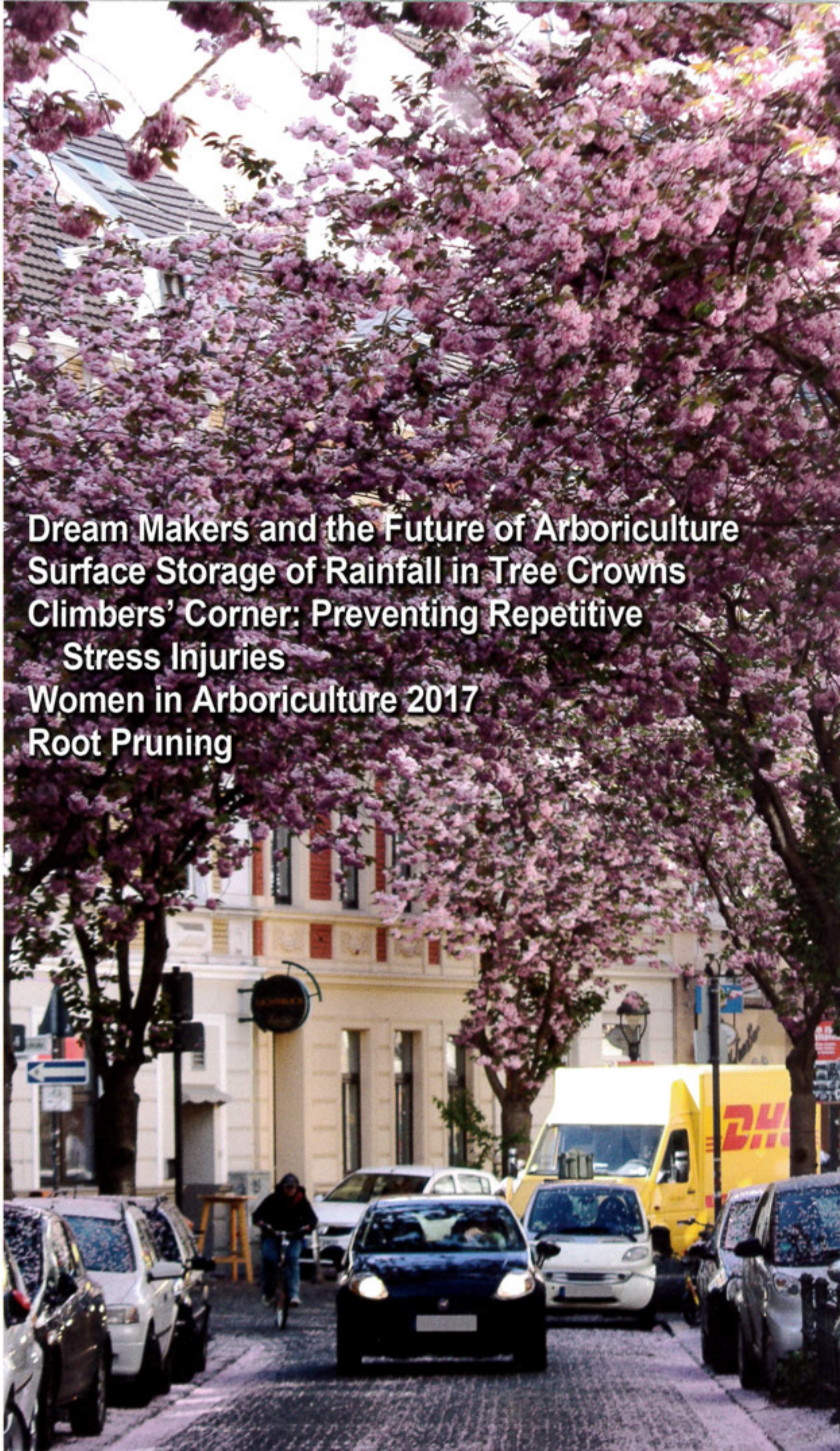


VOLUME 26
NUMBER 3
JUNE 2017

INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY OF ARBORICULTURE
ARBORIST NEWS

ISA

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Dream Makers and the Future of Arboriculture

By John Gathright

Never underestimate the power of highly skilled arborists and tree care professionals who are compassionate, kind, and committed to helping others appreciate the benefits of interacting with trees.

Recently, I was privy to a conversation about millennials and the future of arboriculture, specifically how they will affect the future work force. One of the people studying his demographic explained that parents of millennials want their children to find careers where they have prestige and financial security, whereas the children value helping others (and our planet) over financial gain. He went on to explain that millennials crave information and new experiences; they want an exciting work environment filled with diversity, and a career where they can readily see and feel the benefits of their hard work. This all sounded good to me . . . until the conversation turned a bit pessimistic. The generational researcher later said that millennials don't find arboriculture attractive, and that their parents are leery of the industry because of the perceived lack of safety and prestige, and because of its

low wages. They were, in fact, worried about the future of arboriculture.

When asked of my views on the matter, I surprised everyone by saying I believe the opposite to be true. To be specific, I strongly believe that we are at the tipping point of seeing huge changes in our profession that will greatly increase the financial value of tree care, as well as grow our status and prestige as professionals.

Here in Japan, most of the millennials I know regard professional arborists or tree climbers as having a kind of dream career, a stand-alone and a supportive career that brings positive change to the world. Arborists are Dream Makers—standing shoulder to shoulder with doctors, teachers, and councilors—respected for their passion to nurture people's lives on an intimate, individual level.

Meeting the Challenge

Japan has a rich and ancient history of traditional tree care practices and techniques. However, local history of arborists using ropes and saddles to climb trees is very new.

Sara, age 10, proudly shows off her left thumb, the only digit on her "magic hand," and joyfully says, "I want to be a tree-climbing arborist and an elementary school teacher so I can help children without fingers climb trees and make friends."





A special group of tree climbers ready for a day of fun!

Modern tree care in Japan evolved from “TreeHab”—therapy programs that use Adaptive Tree Climbing Techniques to aid people of all abilities climb trees for recreation, rehabilitation, and therapy.

In 1997, I met with a number of public professionals under a big tree in Seto, Japan. The task ahead of us was enormous: help a 63-year-old lady, Toshiko, leave her wheelchair to climb to the top of a giant sequoia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*). We had no idea how to make it happen, and at the time, there were no credentialed, tree climbing arborists in Japan to ask for help.

Three years later, Toshiko would be the first quadriplegic person to climb 256 feet (78 m) to the top of a giant sequoia. There were many challenges along the way. But, from the top of the fifth largest tree in the world, Toshiko exuberantly screamed, “I am not a cripple! I am a challenger, and a tree climber!”

Her historic tree climb had a profound impact on the history of arboriculture and tree climbing in Japan, opening the door to thousands of Japanese to climb trees for rehabilitation, recreation, and therapy. The inertia of Toshiko’s climb propelled us to create Japan’s first tree climbing school, the Arborist Training Association and Training Institute. I also pursued a doctorate in the physiological, psychological, and societal benefits of purpose-specific tree climbing programs.

Seventeen years later: Japanese tree workers participate in international climbing competitions, the professional arboriculture community in Japan has increased

manifold, and more than 250,000 Japanese children and adults have climbed trees for recreation and outdoor education.

I admit it. I totally underestimated the power and impact of highly skilled arborists and tree care professionals who are compassionate, kind, and committed to helping others.

From a risk management perspective, we knew that having healthy and safe trees to climb was integral to our TreeHab program. And from this perspective, we set out as one might expect, contracting tree workers to help with the climb, and keeping an open-access enrollment to anyone who wanted to participate.

In June 2007, Yumi, age 13, had given up hope that she would walk again. Physiotherapy was incredibly difficult, and she needed a dream—some motivation—to continue through that painful.

Enter TreeHab. Yumi, her family, and a few professionals assembled at Yumi’s favorite public park to attempt her dream of finally climbing a big tree. It required months of preparation (including designing special harness and rigging equipment).

But the instant she was suspended weightlessly 25 feet (7.6 m) off the ground, Yumi exclaimed, “Everybody look! I can’t walk on the ground but I can walk in a tree!”

I looked around and found only tears of joy in the eyes of her family and our support team. I made an effort to bring over the contract workers, whom were standing quietly aside, to meet Yumi and her family. And when the little girl showered them with appreciation for preparing



Nana and Ko before their special climb.

the “Dream Tree” for her climb, the workers had tears in their eyes too.

Those tree workers would later share with me how they had never dreamed their tree work could bring so much joy and happiness to people.

Shifting to the Future of Arboriculture

We actively encourage our arborists to join in our Tree-Hab programs. It can be a little daunting for some, because they must gain a unique set of qualifications, knowledge, and skills to be part of this team. However, these arborists often become fantastic leaders in their communities (and make great ambassadors for ISA and for arboriculture in Japan).

One of the greatest things about knowledge transfer is that it empowers everybody involved. Our arborists stand shoulder to shoulder with other professionals as they come together and learn from one another. City planners, social workers, medical professionals—we all have something to learn from each other.

And as arborists expand their network, they also hone their leadership and messaging skills. They gain confidence, become more perceptive at anticipating the needs of others, and are more adept at applying their life skills, like positive, nonverbal communication.

These benefits, on a smaller scale, ensure arborists find increased confidence and self-worth as they navigate greater success in their personal and professional lives. These skills help credentialed tree workers as they deal with clients and customers, resulting in more work, better work, better contracts, and yes, more money.

We are witnessing some exciting changes on a larger scale as well. Here in Japan, as different governmental departments come together to prioritize tree care for special tree-assisted therapy programs, more money is becoming available for tree work in general. City planners are even considering special tree-assisted therapy programs as they build new parks!

Our TreeHab program has gained traction. But it is only one example of the many ways in which arboriculture professionals can connect with people from a wide spectrum of professions and careers to use trees and green spaces to increase the appreciation for healthy and well cared for trees, while directly helping people better their lives. My examples may be localized to Japan, but I truly believe that these programs, as well as their results and trends, are universal.

Thinking Big, Helping More

Every day, I am more and more convinced that we are entering into the golden age of arboriculture. Globally, articles in newspapers, scientific journals, and elsewhere share studies and research illustrating the benefits of contact with trees, nature, and green spaces. Society as a whole is truly embracing the mental, physical, and restorative health benefits of contact with trees and nature.

Never before has there been a time when the use of healthy trees and urban green spaces has proved as necessary and prescient as it does now. Because now is the time for our profession to step up; now is the time for our profession to play a big role, as leaders, to plant this idea, and see that it grows.

Imagine, if you will, the vast population of disabled people around the globe, and all of the millions of professionals dedicated to helping them. What if we, as arborists and as an organization, were to create a plan to invite the professionals working with these individuals to connect with arborists, landscapers, and city planners to better utilize urban trees and green spaces for therapy, rehabilitation, and other activities? The positive global impact would humongous!

As for what this would do for professional arboriculture, it would make our profession more attractive and prestigious to younger generations that desire to be part of a diverse and exciting work force that offers the opportunity to help the world one tree and one person at a time; a work force where arborists are dream makers.

Arborists directly impact the people in their community. Even more so through special tree-assisted therapy programs. This is a win-win scenario for millennials who want a career with a visible impact, as well as for parents who desire more prestige and financial rewards for their children.

In the words of Victor Hugo, “There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come!”

And per to the famous words of Margret Meade, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; it is the only things that ever has.”

I say, the idea and timing is right, and one of the groups of people who can shape the world are highly skilled, compassionate, committed, and dedicated ISA arborists and professionals.

John Gathright, Ph.D. (www.johngathright.com), is the director of the Japan Arborist Training Institute. Through his organization, Tree Climbing Japan (www.treeclimbingjapan.org), he has changed the lives of thousands of people by providing rehabilitative and therapy-designed tree-climbing programs. He is the keynote speaker for the Sunday evening Arboriculture Celebration, at ISA's 2017 Annual International Conference & Trade Show.



Ko absolutely loves it in the tree tops!



Kubota, along with our amazing team of climbers and aides.

TreeHab: The Healing Power of Scientifically Designed Rehabilitative Tree Climbing Programs

Check out John Gathright's keynote speech at the ISA Annual International Conference. His keynote address is scheduled for the Sunday Arboriculture Celebration (30 July 2017, 6:00 pm).

The topic of Gathright's address mirrors the article published here in *Arborist News*. Gathright has discovered the amazing rehabilitative power of purpose-specific tree climbing for people with disabilities. He focuses on the physiological, psychological, and societal benefits of purpose-specific tree climbing programs in urban forests and green spaces—or, as he calls it, TreeHab.

See you in D.C.!



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