For the past few years, the Arnold Arboretum has been offering its surplus nursery stock to local community parks and gardens. Interested groups qualify simply by their willingness to dig and move the plant material themselves. We try to provide whatever supervision and training is needed along the way to ensure that the plants are transplanted and maintained successfully.

Our first effort along this line began as a somewhat casual response to a request for several trees to plant in a vacant lot which was being developed into a community park. We agreed to provide the plant material as long as people from the neighborhood were willing to dig it up and move it from our nurseries in Weston.

Word spread rapidly through several neighborhoods; by the time we were finished transplanting for the season, over 50
men, women and children had managed to dig up, transport and replant over 100 trees and shrubs.

Neighborhoods seemed to find these plants useful for a variety of landscaping purposes. Residents of a Cambridge housing project moved an entire row of mature honeysuckle to create an instant hedge. A community-run low-cost housing corporation began a storage nursery of our trees on a vacant lot in Roxbury to be available as needed for community landscaping. A few parks were started on vacant lots; a few neighborhood centers were embellished with a flowering tree or shrub; and probably an occasional tree or two found its way into a private yard despite our stipulation that all our plant material be planted on property open to the public.

Tom Kinahan of the Arnold Arboretum demonstrating how to ball and burlap a young tree. Photo: P. Ogilvie.
In addition to its landscaping aspect, this first plant giveaway proved useful to neighborhoods in several less expected ways. As a simple event, it helped some groups to mobilize. The appeal of a tree or two, combined with the effort needed to draw workers together who could transplant the trees, sometimes seemed to provide just what was required to get a group of people moving. As an event it also exposed many people to entirely new experiences, ranging from those of adults who had never used gardening tools before, to a child or two who had never been out to the country before. As an educational process it conveyed useful information and expertise it would be difficult to obtain ordinarily. And in almost every case, it created an unusual involvement between the trees going into a neighborhood, and the people of that neighborhood.

Largely due to this involvement and our own care in trying to demonstrate how to handle and maintain plant material, the prospects of these young trees have been much brighter than one might expect. Few, if any, plants have died due to the shock of transplanting, although a few roughly handled specimens have gone dormant for a month or so. Despite the often rigorous character of the sites (vacant lots, school yards), surprisingly few plants have been harmed.

Since the fate of these trees depends so heavily on a community's real understanding of site characteristics and proper maintenance, in more recent giveaways we have tended to re-focus our efforts from moving a volume of plant material to more carefully assessing sites and teaching the processes involved in transplanting and maintaining trees.

In the long run the real value of our program probably lies in its capacity to involve people with plant material and provide an educational experience.

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