

## TREES

# Advocates push to plant more trees in Centretown

**The issue:** Ottawa's urban tree canopy is in decline. Century-old forests are being torn down for development, trees have been toppled over during rare storms, and reforestation efforts are not keeping up with the cutting down of greenspace.

According to 2019 data, Somerset ward had the least tree coverage at 22%, with Barrhaven coming in second place at 23%. Knoxdale-Merivale, Kanata South, Rideau-Vanier, Stitsville, Alta Vista, Kanata North and Orleans were also under 30%. The municipal ward with the most coverage was College at 48%. These numbers are expected to be lower now after tornadoes and a rare Derecho toppled over trees since the [data was collected](#).

Ottawa's urban tree canopy sits at 31% compared to Gatineau which is 48%.

**Grassroots efforts:** Gentle Ways for our Planet is a small organization that is looking to have a big impact when it comes to fighting climate change. Founded by former University of Ottawa professor Aida Warah, the group's initiative is to promote environmental issues while planting 30 million trees by 2030.

On a sunny fall day in September 2022, Gentle Ways for our Planet [planted 125 native trees](#) at Neil Nesbit park in Barrhaven. A year later, 325 trees were planted at [nearby Mowat Farm Park](#).

Warah told the Ottawa Lookout that she believes in “equity planting” and notes trees are not being planted enough to keep up with climate change.

“Forest benefits are very well known now. Their physical health advantages and mental health advantages are very well known through research. Walking in nature is extremely beneficial to your health,” said Warah. “Under the climate change vision we also can’t underestimate the importance of trees for cooling effects. In 2023 we saw many heatwaves and it was one of the hottest years on record.”

The advantages also stretch beyond human life. Birds, squirrels and other animal forms call the trees home. They are essential parts of our neighbourhoods, notes Warah, and play a vital role in our ecosystems.

## **A complicated legacy of cutting down trees**

**An axe to grind:** Ottawa has a complicated and troubled legacy when it comes to cutting down mature trees. Over the decades neighbours have fought to save historic trees on city blocks.

Warah said it’s frustrating to see decisions like this being made when evidence clearly suggests the positive impact trees play on society.

I feel both saddened and angry. Nowadays with the knowledge we have, it’s not that we don’t know better,” she said. “It takes a long time for a forest to grow but only hours to disturb it. Seeing this act of destruction is bewildering. I wish the people making those decisions would make them more rationally and would learn from all the knowledge that we have today. It’s a sense of disbelief that this is still happening.”

Gentle Ways for our Planet is looking to Centretown for its next reforestation efforts. It's planning to hold another tree planting event in the fall in partnership with the City of Ottawa.

## **NCC damaged forests will take decades to replant**

**Forests destroyed:** When a rare derecho storm hit the Capital in May 2022, it knocked down tens of thousands of trees across the city. In the NCC-owned Pine Grove and Pinhey Forests, at least 70% of the tree canopy was destroyed, according to [CBC](#). It wiped out about 1,890 hectares of urban forest space — roughly the size of about five Experimental Farms.

Dominique Huras, Strategic Communications Advisor at the NCC, told the Ottawa Lookout that damage was more severe than during the 1998 ice storm.

“Environment Canada clocked wind speeds faster than 130 km/h. These winds had a significant impact on the Greenbelt’s forest canopy and natural area,” said Huras. “Hundreds of thousands of trees were impacted, especially in the Pine Grove, Southern Farm and Pinhey Forest sectors of the Greenbelt. The storm also left its mark on large parts of Mer Bleue and Stony Swamp.”

**Environmental impacts:** Huras said the storm didn't just take down the thin red pines planted in straight lines by the Ontario government in the 1950s and 60s to one day be used as hydro poles. Large, healthy and mature trees were also completely uprooted and will take decades to regenerate.

“There is also an impact on the ecological benefits that trees provide, including the storage of carbon, moderating local climate by providing shade, and regulating temperature extremes,” she said. “The Greenbelt will look very different in years to come. The trees lost played an essential role in environmental sustainability and in recreation. The numerous species that call the Greenbelt home will adjust their behaviour and demonstrate their resiliency.”

**Restoration and reforestation:** Two years after the windstorm hit Ottawa, swaths of the NCC-owned forests sit bare, awaiting new life to grow. The organization said its immediate efforts were to remove any hazards including fallen trees which were in recreational trails and pathways.

Now attention is turning to Phase 2, which focuses on removing coarse woody debris piled along trails, pathways and boundaries and addressing fire risks. This work will be done within the limited time window around nesting season and during optimal ground conditions found in late fall and early winter.

The NCC plans to focus on natural regeneration alongside replanting efforts, but the work is expected to take decades. Much like after the 2018 tornadoes which touched down in Ottawa and Gatineau, successional species are beginning to grow on their own. Tree species like Balsam poplar can grow up to three metres in just three years.

**Not all bad news:** New wildlife is starting to call the damaged forests home. An increased number of native insects eating dead or dying coniferous trees have also been observed.

“These insects are now a food source for a population of three-toed woodpeckers, who tend to appear after a major disturbance causing trees to die,” said Huras. “As a result, this is the first time since 2014 that American three-toed woodpeckers have been spotted in the Greenbelt, and the first time that multiple individuals have been found staying in the Greenbelt.”



*Gentle Ways for our Planet trees in Neil Nesbit Park. Photo by Charlie Senack.*



*Community members gather in March 2023 to fight the Tewin Land clearing. Photo by Charlie Senack.*



*A large portion of Pinhey Forest sits bare in February 2023, months after a Derecho toppled 70 per cent of its trees. Photo by Charlie Senack.*



*A fallen tree outside Horizon House in Parkwood Hills following the May 2022 Derecho.  
Photo by Charlie Senack.*