



JOHN LOK/SEATTLE TIMES/MCT
Bernie O'Brien works to dig out a Douglas fir at a home in Bellvue, Wash., last month. O'Brien hunts down people wanting to get rid of trees and digs them up to use on his own property.

Spare That Tree!

Seattle Man's Passion Is To Rescue And Relocate Unwanted Trees

BY ERIK LACITIS

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SEATTLE — In the past five years, working by himself using mostly a shovel and a pickax, Bernie O'Brien has dug up, loaded onto his 30-year-old Ford pickup and then transplanted some 100 trees that weighed 200 pounds to more than 400 pounds each.

He's also transplanted to acreage he and his wife own on Pierce County, Wash.'s Key Peninsula another 400 trees that ranged from seedlings to six-footers.

Yes, you could call O'Brien a man with a passion.

His wife, Michelle McCormick, calls him the "the human shovel."

This 51-year-old West Seattle guy, who talks about the trees he has transplanted as if they're members of his family, has rescued hundreds of trees from being bulldozed or simply cut down. He has given them new homes.

As O'Brien explains, "Trees are not just a number and we can never have too many. They, too, have character."

When a neighbor by his five-acre Key Peninsula property cut down a bunch of old-growth trees, O'Brien says, he noticed that the owls he could hear at night went away.

And O'Brien liked the privacy the old trees gave him, and wanted to replace the rampant blackberry bushes. He decided he would create his own forest on the five acres that's mostly pastureland and used to be a holly tree farm, with the original home still on it.

O'Brien does get a little mystical-sounding when talking about trees.

O'Brien's real job is as a senior consultant for Artech, a local firm that manages art collections, so it's not as if he just walked in from a Rainbow Family gathering.

Since he started doing this five years ago, mostly every other weekend, O'Brien says, "I view winter and rainy months much differently."

At this time of the year, he sees "root systems show fresh white tender vines through the soil." He hears "frogs sing all night." It is, "a time to slow down and observe the year's accomplishments."

This nature stuff isn't a trait that's just part of the stereotypical Northwest character, says Cass Turnbull, a landscaper who founded Plant Amnesty in Seattle "to lead society out of the dark ages of landscape care."

With 900 members nationwide

and in four countries who believe, for example, that trees shouldn't be topped for landscaping purposes, she says, "I get calls and emails all the time from people who say they are spiritually involved with trees. Trees have a silent, timeless grandeur. It's a theme that runs through all cultures and places. You've heard references to the 'speaking tree?'"

On a recent Friday morning, yet another cold, rainy winter day, O'Brien has driven to a Bellevue, Wash., rambler that is scheduled to be demolished.

He says the rambler's previous owner, who had planted the prop-

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erty with numerous shrubs and trees, is now in a nursing home. Soon a bulldozer is set to come in.

One way that O'Brien finds out about a tree that somebody wants to give away is by scouring Craigslist, and sometimes posting on it. Dogwoods, firs, hemlocks, rhodies, mountain huckleberries. At one point, he had an app for his smartphone that messaged him every time the word "tree" came up on Craigslist. O'Brien gave up the app when he was deluged with messages such as ones about cat trees, those carpeted things for cats to scratch on.

"If you have trees that have been planted too close to the house, planted under wires, outgrown their space in the city. ... Then I have a good home for them," he posts. "Max thickness is 5" trunk ... I dig these up myself so imagine how much one person could physically take on."

It turns out there are plenty of people who want to find that good home for the tree they no longer can keep.

On his property, by the entrance, O'Brien planted a Douglas fir that now is around seven feet tall.

About three years ago, a 10-year-old boy answered O'Brien's Craigslist posting and said he had a tree that he been growing in a barrel since it was a seedling in the backyard of his family home. He had gotten it at a Weyerhaeuser field trip. His parents said the tree had gotten too big and had to go.

O'Brien planted the tree, and the boy could look it up on O'Brien's website, bernieo.smugmug.com/WoodlandGardenProject.

Then there was the pink flowering crabapple tree from a University District home. A woman had planted it in memory of her

brother, but had put it too close to her house.

"She was really sad she did that," says O'Brien. Now the tree is thriving on his property.

On this morning in Bellevue, besides some shrubs, the main prize is a Douglas fir, about 12 to 14 feet tall.

After a couple hours of digging, the tree isn't budging much. By now, O'Brien's pants are coated in mud.

He says he likes digging in the rain. The soil is softer. It is only during the hot summer months, and because of the holiday time in December, that he doesn't transplant trees.

Here in Bellevue, it's the tap root that grows straight down that's the problem. O'Brien already has dug a circle five feet across and two feet deep. The more he saves

of the root, the better chance the transplant will hold; a fifth of the trees don't survive a move.

He belts a fire hose around the tree and begins to swing and pull on the tree. The tap root isn't budging.

Just watching O'Brien is tiring. Grunt. Pull. Grunt.

His wife says she has worried that he'll keel over of a heart attack.

She distinctly remembers one day looking out the window of their farm, and seeing her husband's legs sticking out from under a pile of weeds.

"I ran out. I was crying. I thought something had happened, that he was dead," says McCormick. But, she adds, "He's a lot stronger than he looks."

Finally, O'Brien concedes to the tap root. He brings out a battery-operated saw and cuts the root at about two feet.

O'Brien says that after a day of prying root balls, and dragging trees, he aches for the next three days.

But, he tells his wife, "I keep reminding her that the exercise is keeping me alive ... spirits and physical health."

On this Friday, in the later morning, accompanied by his Pomeranian dog, Diego, O'Brien



JOHN LOK/SEATTLE TIMES/MCT
ABOVE: O'Brien tries to dig around the tap root of a Douglas fir, which grows straight down, at a home in Bellvue, Wash. BELOW: O'Brien loads the Douglas fir onto his truck. The tree will eventually be replanted on his property.



drives onto the Fauntleroy-Southworth ferry to reach the Key Peninsula.

Sometimes his wife asks O'Brien how many more trees he is going to plant. At some point, those 500 trees that were planted will grow up to be big, big trees.

O'Brien talks about maybe buying more acreage. He talks about turning his tree farm into some kind of retreat place.

He talks about knowing a 70-year-old man who still plows his farmland.

"I have no doubts I could keep doing this until I was 70," says O'Brien.

Leaving the ferry and turning onto the highway, O'Brien uses his truck's turn signal.

The signal's handle has a unique look, just like the headlight switch and windshield-wiper knob.

O'Brien has taken Giant Sequoia cones, drilled a hole in each at the bottom, filled the hole with epoxy, and attached

them to use as knobs.

"For such a small thing," he says about the cones, "they represent so much potential. I do think of that often while driving. Potential."

Say what you will about people who find spirituality in trees.

This is one content guy who says about transplanting trees: "I sleep well."

April 'Youth In The Garden' Webinar Is Coming Up

BROOKINGS — SDSU Extension is offering information for those working with educational teaching gardens during the April Youth in the Garden Webinar.

This month's webinar will feature guest presenter, Tim Olsen, Ground Works director, who will discuss resourcing people and funding for your garden project. An additional session on establishing raised beds will be presented by Chris Zdorovtsov, Community Development Field Specialist.

Program leaders from across the state have been participating and connecting. School teachers, afterschool and summer garden program leaders are all welcome to participate.

"Not only will participants gain knowledge on specific topics, this forum provides an opportunity for discussion where program leaders can ask questions about their personal projects or share tips and ideas with each other, said Chris Zdorovtsov, SDSU Extension Community Development Field Specialist.

The Webinars run the last Wednesday of the Month, 3:45-4:45 p.m. Starting in May and running through the growing season, an additional Webinar will run each month. Webinars are an hour long and will typically have two presentation topics running 15 to 20 minutes each with about 20 minutes for a discussion session within the learning community.

To join each Webinar visit <http://igrow.org/events/category/gardens/>. Participants are encouraged to click on log in within 30 minutes of the specified time.

SCHEDULE:

April 25: Presentation 1: "Resourcing the Garden Program: People and Money," Tim Olsen, Director, Ground Works.

Presentation 2: "Building Raised Beds," Chris Zdorovtsov, Community Development Field Specialist, SDSU Extension

Discussion Time: "Are you Organized? — The Season is Starting!"

May 16: Presentation 1: "Ages & Stages in the Garden," Marilyn Rasmussen, 4-H/Youth Development Specialist, SDSU Extension

Presentation 2: "Food Safety in the Garden," Lavonne Meyer, Food Safety Field Specialist, SDSU Extension

Discussion Time: "Time to Get Growing-Status Updates"

May 30: Presentation 1: "Community Nutrition Recipe Demonstrations," Suzanne Stuka, Food & Family Program Director, SDSU Extension

Presentation 2: "Disease control in the Garden," Rhoda Burrows, Fruit & Vegetable Specialist, SDSU Extension

Discussion Time: "Having Production Problems? Let's Problem Solve!"

Additional Webinars are scheduled for June 13 & 27 and July 11 & 25. For more information contact Chris Zdorovtsov, SDSU Extension Community Development Field Specialist at 605-782-3290 or Christina.Zdorovtsov@sdstate.edu.

Additionally, if you are interested in joining the Youth Gardening LISTSERV to receive information on relevant events and funding opportunities or to exchanging questions and ideas with others involved in similar projects, email Zdorovtsov.

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