



American sycamore

# Silent Giants

National and state registries honor the country's big trees.

By Jenna Kerwin

There is a secret kingdom in my grandparents' backyard. You can only get to it by going through the hidden portal in the big sugar maple tree.

At least that's what I always thought growing up. I remember the tree being taller than the houses and so wide I could press myself against it during games of hide-and-seek. Cicada casings stuck to its bark and my cousin laughed as he picked them off and chased me with them. I remember swinging lazily in the tire swing attached to its branches, watching the squirrels prance higher and

streets; some wear the scars of time; and some are so grand, their histories are part of the town's personality. Each year, many of these trees are nominated as "champion trees," and a few lucky ones are even crowned national winners.

The program in charge of this arboreal contest is the National Register of Big Trees, spearheaded by the non-profit citizens' conservation organization, American Forests. In September 1940, *American Forests* magazine contained an article that invited people to find the biggest trees. This

to an oak that is an incredible 100 feet tall with a twenty-two-foot circumference.

Nominated trees are reviewed by committee at the beginning of every odd-numbered year. Whether a tree is included in the list depends on how high it scores. Points are awarded based on the sum of the tree's trunk circumference, height, and  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the average crown spread. The tree with the most points is crowned the national champion, which means they are the largest recorded specimen in their species. If a tree is not named a national champion, but has a high score, it remains on the list. These "challenger trees" are not big enough to qualify as a champion, but are still included in the database in case a current champion is not able to keep its winning status and must be replaced.

Many states run their own state tree register, listing state champions; DEC maintains New York's Big Tree Register. Big trees are selected based on American Forests' criteria and the champions and challengers are included on its list. If a state champion is a potential national champion, it is nominated by DEC to become part of the national register.

Several of New York's own trees are currently listed as national champions and challengers. They include: a northern bayberry in Nassau County; a common juniper in Schenectady County; a black locust in Wayne

Champion trees come in all shapes and sizes,  
but all are the largest of their species.

higher up the limbs. I wished I could have followed them to the top.

Such a tree naturally lent itself to imaginary games in other worlds—even if the "secret portal" to that world was nothing more than climbing a few low branches and jumping back down. That sugar maple always seemed more special than the other trees dotting the central New York landscape. To me, it was a champion of trees.

Across the United States there are trees just like this. You've probably seen these trees before—the ones that look far too big for their species, or so large they must be hundreds of years old. Not all of them may be doorways to secret kingdoms, but they are all eye-catching natural wonders of our world: some are contradictory centerpieces of urban

captured the public's interest, and the register was begun. Over the years, the register has gained more support, seen numerous name changes, and, perhaps most importantly, listed more than 700 registered champion trees.

The main goal of the national register is to educate the public about protecting and preserving our country's trees. The register helps garner public interest in this important topic by highlighting the pantheons of the arboreal world, and awarding special "champion" status to the juggernauts of each species.

Champion trees come in all shapes and sizes, but all are the largest of their species. As such, a champion tree can range from an eighteen-foot tall hazelnut with a five-inch circumference

County; a scarlet hawthorn and a Norway spruce in Oneida County; and a northern oak, a speckled alder, a prairie crab apple and a purple osier willow in Monroe County.

It's easy to nominate a tree to be part of the national and New York State registers (see sidebar this page). You can check American Forests' and

DEC's websites for species eligible or in-demand, and guidelines for nominating and measuring trees. If you need help measuring your tree, you can contact a local arborist or forester for assistance.

Many trees worthy of placement in the national and state registers of big trees are never nominated, and some lost their national champion status because they

were never re-measured to update the listing. In some cases, though, current champions have been replaced simply because a larger tree was found and nominated. Be sure to explore your town, woods or even backyard for a champion near you. Remember to measure the tree periodically so it can be updated with the register and potentially keep any champion tree status it may win.

Whether there's a giant maple in your backyard with a swing tied to its branches, a towering weeping willow looming over a pond at the outskirts of town, or a huge oak hidden deep in the forest, champion trees are everywhere. Their size begs recognition and respect; their stature exudes something like magic. If you know of one of these trees, consider nominating it for a place on the National Register of Big Trees.

**Jenna Kerwin** is the staff writer for *Conservationist*, and is still trying to find a way back to the secret kingdom in her grandparents' backyard.

Anyone can  
nominate  
a big tree.

In New York State, visit DEC's website at: [www.dec.ny.gov/animals/5248.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/5248.html) to find information on the program, download a nomination form, and locate contact information for a DEC forester.

To nominate a big tree for the national register, just follow these guidelines:

- 🌿 Be sure of the tree's species.
- 🌿 Measure the height, trunk circumference, and average crown spread. (For a measuring guide, see [www.americanforests.org/resources/bigtrees/measure.php](http://www.americanforests.org/resources/bigtrees/measure.php).)
- 🌿 Take pictures of the tree.
- 🌿 Have your tree verified by a qualified forester or arborist.
- 🌿 Contact your local DEC Lands & Forests office with your information.

...a champion tree can range from an eighteen-foot tall hazelnut with a five-inch circumference to an oak that is an incredible 100 feet tall with a twenty-two-foot circumference.



Susan L. Shafer

# Tree Talk

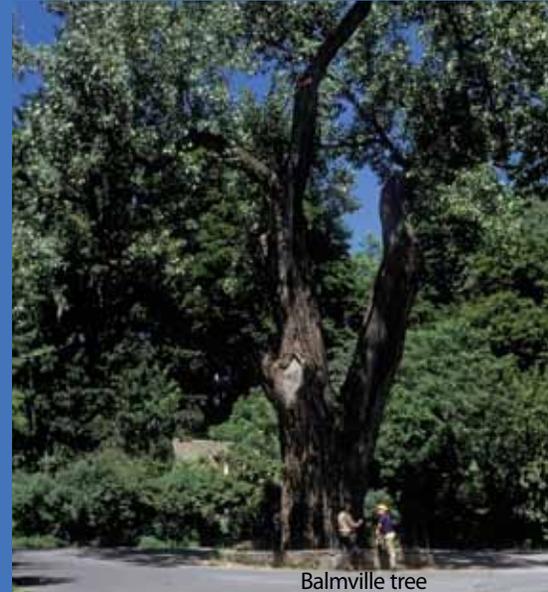
Rich Claus

If trees could talk they'd probably entertain people for hours with their stories. Champion trees naturally lend themselves to grand fantasies, but sometimes a tree's story needn't be imagined.

The Scythe Tree is a balm of Gilead (a type of poplar) in Waterloo, New York. While the passage of time has taken its toll, the tree remains a famous historical treasure. In 1861 a young farmer boy named James Wyman Johnson enlisted in the Union Army. As a promise to his parents that he would return, he placed a scythe in the crotch of a balm of Gilead tree in the yard. In April 1864, James died in a confederate hospital from a severe wound. His parents refused to accept his death, and so left the scythe in the tree, hoping their lost son would return. Within 20 years, both of James' parents died, and the scythe was never recovered. Years later, two brothers—Raymond and Lynn Shaffer—were living on the Scythe Tree Farm, as it became known, and enlisted in World War I. They, too, placed scythes in the poplar tree,

beside James', which the tree had now grown around. The two brothers returned safely, but only retrieved the handles of their scythes, leaving the three blades in the tree. Today, the blades are painted to make it easier for them to be seen in the old bark that has engulfed them.

The Balmville Tree is the oldest living eastern cottonwood on record in the United States. For a long time legend had it that the tree grew out of George Washington's riding crop, but core sampling proved the tree dates back to 1699—years before Washington. In fact, in Washington's day the tree had already reached its life expectancy of 75 years. Defying the odds, it continued to grow into the nineteenth century. Locals mistook the tree for a balm of Gilead. They named it Balm Tree, and the subsequent municipality "Balmville" sprang up. However, with the advent of concrete and pavement, roads built around the tree trapped it behind steel and concrete, causing it to weaken. In the 1970s, DEC Commissioner Ogden Reid declared it the first individual



Balmville tree

tree to be protected by New York, and named it a state park—the smallest in the state. The tree was near death in the latter part of the twentieth century, but residents and various consultants were able to repair it, though the tree had to be cut from 110 to 83 feet. To this day, DEC is responsible for the maintenance and care of this historic treasure. Interestingly, several efforts were made to clone the tree, but to no avail. However, a neighbor and devoted caretaker of the tree, Dick Severo, planted one of the Balmville Tree's branches in his yard where it has grown ever since.



Scythe tree

Rich Claus



Scythe tree

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