

# Arborist seeks the right tree for the right job

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SANTA CRUZ — David Mufly could easily pass for any of the hundreds of ex-UC Santa Cruz students finding it hard to escape Santa Cruz's gravitational pull after graduation. His natural-fiber clothes are in colors of grass and sand. He wears sandals. His hair and beard are a little on the shaggy side.

In truth, Mufly (pronounced *MUFF-lee*) is a Stanford University graduate, licensed arborist and longtime Palo Alto resident. Since mid-June he has been unobtrusively bicycling up and down the streets of Santa Cruz cataloging trees.

Street by street, tree by tree, he's seeking out the good, the bad and the really, really ugly.

And forget what the tree books say. He's performing the acid test: how a tree does right here, right now.

"I want a tree that gets an A," Mufly said on a walk through downtown Santa Cruz. "Not a tree that gets a D or an F."

Mufly's goal is to help the city of Santa Cruz revamp its master street-tree list so that conflicts like those now in the news will subside. The list is expected to go to the city Parks and Recreation Commission for consideration in September. The goal is to prepare an illustrated booklet with a guide to good and bad examples of notable trees. If all goes well, expect the booklet by Arbor Day, Sept. 23.

"He's like a Johnny Appleseed kind of guy," said Ray Sherrod, field supervisor-arborist with the Parks and Recreation Department, who hired



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

David Mufly travels around the city, checking out how well trees grow in certain locations.

Mufly for the \$2,500 project.

Sherrod recalls meeting Mufly 10 years ago. Sherrod had been written up for his "One Thousand Trees" planting project.

"David heard about it, and pedaled all the way over here from Palo Alto," Sherrod recalled.

Growing a green and happy city is a lot more than just sticking things in the ground. The current city list is loaded with trees that have such serious flaws that the city no longer suggests they be planted.

One example is the pretty, pink-flowering black locust trees that saw a wave of popularity a few years

back. They're already showing signs of cracking and brittleness. Similarly, Sherrod expects the new list will be minus the white birch (*Betula jacquemontii*) like the new ones planted down the middle of lower Pacific Avenue, and the Raywood ash, a fast-growing tree that, alas, dies back in the central canopy.

Looking at trees with Mufly is a bit of a one-on-one Trees 101.

He seeks out shade where he can find it, is enthusiastic about his subject and is opinionated but funny, whether the subject is purple-leaved plum trees and cell phones, which he doesn't like, or pink-flowering horse

chestnuts, which he does.

There's little in his background to suggest his present passion.

Mufly grew up in Pender, Neb., population 1,000, the youngest of the town doctor's three sons. He was interested in cars, served as an altar boy and earned his spending money mowing lawns.

"My family's idea of an outdoor adventure was buying a Winnebago and a big power boat," he said while sitting in the shade of the trees at Abbott Square in downtown Santa Cruz. At 18, he headed off to Stanford, carrying the reputation as "the smartest person the town had ever

known." He quickly learned that lots of others had that reputation, too, but he managed to graduate in the middle of his class with a degree in mechanical engineering.

As his once-radical classmates began taking six-figure dot-com jobs, Mufly found himself veering off in a different direction, toward the world of public service and ecology, moved in part by books such as Alvin Toffler's "The Third Wave."

"I wanted to work to help the immense challenges human beings face," he said.

Eventually, he landed in Palo Alto among people involved in various social and environmental activities: Earth Day, trailblazing and tree planting projects.

Over the past decade, Mufly's been active in getting thousands of trees planted. The work included an oak reforestation project for Stanford and fruit-tree give-away programs for school children.

Nevertheless, he's no "woodsman-spare-that-tree-at-all-costs" tree-hugger. He questioned the wisdom of making it too difficult for people to safeguard their lives and property from tree damage.

What about heritage trees?

"If the public's getting the benefit, then maybe the public should share the cost," he said.

It is much, much better to plant the right tree in the first place, he said. And that's the point of his project.

"If it's going to be there a couple of centuries, it ought to be worth taking the time to plan," he said.

Knowing where to see good specimens of a given tree is important,

Mufly said. Even more important, though, is knowing where to see bad specimens.

Like Palo Alto, Mufly said, Santa Cruz was built on its best soil: beautiful, deep alluvial dirt built up over the centuries by the periodic flooding of the San Lorenzo River. Water is plentiful, too, flowing from the terraces surrounding the city.

The result is that trees in public areas look so gorgeous they inspire people to plant them in less-favorable locations. Thus, his plans to include places to see really miserable examples of popular trees.

Personally, Mufly is big on bullet-proof fruit trees like black fruiting mulberries, figs and loquats, but the fruit they would drop — and the potential slip-and-trip injuries and liabilities that could mean — will likely keep them off the street-tree list.

Trees that require supplemental watering also have a huge strike against them when it comes to making the cut. Maybe the present resident is faithful with the hose, but many trees easily outlive the people who planted them. And of course there's the prospect of drought.

"I want a tree that's going to be here in 50 years, and 10 of those may be severe droughts," Mufly said.

He can tick off the many reasons to plant trees: economic (it can raise property values); aesthetic (beautiful flowers, interesting leaves, bark, form); practical (privacy screen, sound barrier, bird habitat).

But for him, it's a lot simpler. "The real reason is to enjoy them," Mufly said.