



These three giant *Melaleuca linarifolia* can be found on Mission Street in Santa Cruz.

SHARON HULL — CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

# Towering figures

Trees saluted, including champs from Santa Cruz, Monterey counties

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Most Californians are aware that our enormous coastal redwoods (*Sequoia sempervirens*) and the Giant Sequoias (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) native to the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada range are famous worldwide as being among the largest and oldest trees on the planet.

And most state residents also know the largest and grandest of these trees, such as the General Sherman tree, have been measured, their height, girth and weight documented, and that most of them are now carefully protected.

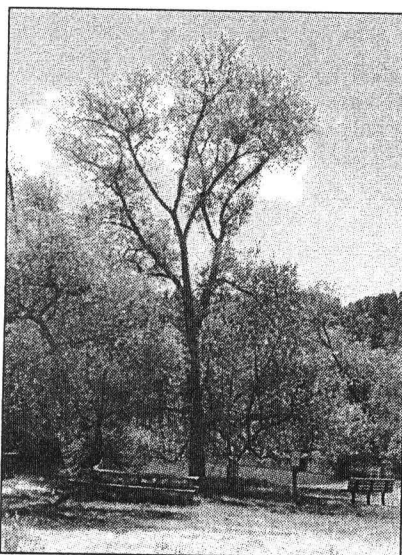
But not everyone knows that other tree species all over the country also have been measured and compared, and that a registry of the country's most impressive trees exists online, in the National Big Tree Program.

And catch this: Both Santa Cruz and Monterey counties are home to some of these champion-stock trees.

The National Big Tree Program, according to online research, for more than 70 years has enlisted volunteers nationwide to locate, protect and register the biggest trees, while educating the public about the benefits of mature trees and forests. According to Wikipedia, the program is active in all 50 states, "and has been used as a model for many state big-tree programs and several international ones, in places such as Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Mexico." There are about 750 champion trees crowned annually in the U.S.

Within California, California Polytechnic Institute (CalPoly) and the Urban Forest Ecosystems Institute maintain an official registry of California Big

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This champion Red Willow can be found at Quail Hollow Ranch County Park in Felton.

## BIG TREES

Since 1940, the National Big Tree Program has recognized the nation's biggest and oldest trees. More than 750 champions are crowned each year and documented in an biannual publication — the National Register of Big Trees. The goal of the program is to preserve and promote the iconic stature of these living monarchs and to educate people about the role these trees and forests play in sustaining a healthy environment.

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# Trees

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Trees at [ufei.calpoly.edu](http://ufei.calpoly.edu). A program of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and Northern and Southern California Societies of American Foresters, the website notes that "it maintains records for the largest specimen of each native and naturalized tree species growing in California. The register seeks to recognize and sustain these living landmarks."

The site also notes that "not all champions are literal giants like the General Sherman Giant Sequoia. The National Champion Smoke Tree, for example, is a mere 17 feet tall, with a crown spread of 12 feet and circumference of 48 inches."

The registry is maintained by Dr. Matthew Ritter, a CalPoly botany professor and director of the CalPoly Plant Conservatory. (Interestingly, Ritter has a local connection: He was a visiting scholar at the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum from 2006-2010.)

So how is it decided that a tree merits Big Tree status? Here is the formula, established by American Forests:  $\text{Trunk Circumference (inches)} + \text{Height (feet)} + \frac{1}{4} \text{ Average Crown Spread (feet)} = \text{Total Points}$ . A tree must be re-measured every 10 years to keep championship status. (See [www.americanforests.org/bigtrees](http://www.americanforests.org/bigtrees) for specific guidelines.) Anyone can nominate a tree using this formula.

Santa Cruz County resident Al Keuter, a volunteer at Quail Hollow Ranch County Park in Felton, noticed that one very large willow growing by the park's pond was not quite like the two common willow species there.

He identified it as a Red Willow (*Salix laevigata*), took its measurements using surveying equipment, and in 2012 nominated it for Big Tree recognition. It was not only accepted for the registry but is now considered a National



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*M. linearifolia* flower clusters are a sight to behold.

Champion, as the largest known Red Willow.

Just how large is it? It stands 56.4 feet tall, with a 39.31 foot canopy and it is 66.25 inches in girth, earning 132 points. Compared to a Giant Sequoia, it is only middle-sized, but compared to other Red Willows, it is a winner.

California has 334 Big Tree listings. Of those, 132 are national champions, while 39 are co-champions. While these Big Trees can be found statewide, some areas seem to have more than the usual number, perhaps because the trees have been especially protected and well cared for.

For example, the campus at Stanford University boasts more than a few.

In Monterey County, four trees are listed — a holly, a madrone, an acacia and a eucalyptus — all of them on private property not open to visitors.

In Santa Cruz County, three trees in addition to the Red Willow are listed; they include a melaleuca (actually a group of three trees, with one the largest), an oak and a buckeye. The oak and buckeye are on private property and are not accessible to the public without special permission, but anyone can visit the champion Red Willow at Quail Hollow or the Snow in Summer melaleucas by the Dignity Health Medical Group/Dominican building on Mission Street.

The registry does not disclose the exact locations

of any of the Big Trees but astute observers may be able to determine location by recognizing buildings or other details in the photographs on the website. Scroll through the listings to see if you are familiar with a specific tree or a site.

At the end of the California Big Trees listing, the website sums it up like this: "Each California champion has its own history, its own story. Perhaps no one knows these stories better than the nominators of the champions. These people have a genuine interest in big trees that has led them to the forest depths, into arid deserts and to urban and residential areas. Champion trees can be found growing just about everywhere across the state. Trees are a valuable part of our environment. They help purify the air and water, protect watershed areas, prevent soil erosion, enhance wildlife habitats, increase property values and heighten awareness of spiritual values."

Champion trees also bring pride and recognition to the nominators, owners and to the tree itself. The California Register of Big Trees hopes to increase awareness of our valuable living assets and to encourage individuals to locate and nominate more champions."

So do you know a tree that you suspect might be a champion? The California Big Trees registry wants to hear from you!