

Meet our oldest living residents

They're waiting to tell you a story about how our neighborhoods have grown and changed. They haven't moved around much in the 75, 90, 125 years they've been here. They've done some growing of their own, weathered some hard years, and have seen plenty of change.

Figured it out yet? We're talking about our trees.

Portland has more than 300 Heritage Trees, which have a special designation because of their unique size, age or historical significance. Northeast Portland neighborhoods have a great cluster of Heritage Trees north of Broadway, east of Interstate, south of Killingsworth and west of NE 33rd. A bunch are probably within walking distance of you, so it's time to meet some of them, especially one of our favorites, the Pearson Pine at NE 29th and Fremont.

Food for Thought

Long ago before neighborhoods existed on these lands, there were forests of Douglas-fir, hemlock, western red cedar, alder, maple and even pine that blanketed these lands. Gradually many of those trees were cut either for lumber or to make room for the farm fields and orchards that followed.

And then 100 years ago when most of our neighborhoods were just taking shape, the people who built our streets and houses figured the new homeowners would want tree-lined streets. But they knew it would take a while, so they planted many different kinds. Some of those have gotten old and big.

One such tree is the big Ponderosa pine at the southwest corner of NE 29th and Alameda. A few years back, I nominated that tree to Portland's heritage tree list after learning its story, which goes something like this:

Back in about 1885, there was a forest fire that burned through this area and killed many trees, young and old, but left some trees untouched. After the fire, a local farmer named Samuel Pearson—who used to run a dairy that stood about where Alameda School is today—found one of these young seedlings that survived the fire: a Ponderosa pine tree, which is much more common in eastern Oregon. Because it was different than most of the other trees around here, Pearson knew it would always stand out, so he planted it in a special place to mark the corner of his property. Today, it's a giant visible from all around. His dairy and cows are long gone, but Samuel Pearson was right: that tree sure stands out. So do all of the other Heritage Trees in the neighborhood.

Activity Suggestions & Curiosities

1. Have a look at the trees around your house. Can you tell which one is the tallest or the oldest? Ask around your family or your neighbors to see if you can learn when your trees were planted. (*One family who lived in our house planted a live Christmas tree in front of our house back in the 1970s and it grew tall before it had to be removed*).
2. How about your neighborhood? Can you tell which trees are the tallest or the oldest? Have they been trimmed to make way for the power lines? Can you see old scars where branches may have broken off in the snow, ice or wind?
3. Here's something that might be fun: see if you can identify the species of trees you have around your house or on your block. There are many clues to look at when you identify your tree: the shape of its leaves (or needles); the texture of its bark; its shape and size; its flowers, cones, seeds or fruit. Check out this helpful tree identification tool:
http://oregonstate.edu/trees/dichotomous_key/index.html
4. Which is your favorite tree in your neighborhood? Why? How have you seen it change? Draw a picture of your favorite tree.
5. Draw a map that shows the different trees around your house or on your block and what kind they are.
6. Go visit the Pearson Pine and stand underneath its branches. Did you know this is one of the oldest living things in our area? What stories do you think it could tell?
7. Did you know trees all have different sounds as the winds blow through? Next windy day, listen carefully.
8. Here's a link to the map of Heritage trees in Alameda-Irvington. Choose a few to visit and find your favorite. <https://alamedahistory.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/local-heritage-trees.pdf>

Check out these other links:

Be sure to read more about the Pearson pine and the Pearson Dairy:

<https://alamedahistory.org/alameda-stories/the-pearson-place/>

A zoomable map showing the location of all of Portland's Heritage Trees

<https://www.portlandoregon.gov/parks/41049>

City of Portland Heritage Tree Website

<https://www.portlandoregon.gov/parks/40280>

This outstanding guide by David-Paul B. Hedberg about what our Heritage Trees have to say

<https://www.portlandoregon.gov/parks/article/534522>

And David-Paul's guide to researching your own trees

<https://www.portlandoregon.gov/parks/article/655397>

Home History School is a collection of activities for kids of all ages to experience and connect with neighborhood history in Northeast Portland, Oregon. This is one of a dozen "lesson plans" on a variety of local topics. The collection—which we're adding to each Monday this spring—can be found at www.alamedahistory.org. For more information or other ideas, contact Doug Decker, doug@alamedahistory.org / 503-901-5510.