

big trees deep roots

STAR-TELEGRAM PHOTOS BY RON T. ENNIS



By **Jessie Milligan**, Star-Telegram Staff Writer

It has its own song, this 70-foot-tall Texas red oak that rustles its leaves in the breeze.

It's an old song, one that started when physician Sim Hulsey dug up three young oaks on his family's Parker County farm and transplanted them in his Berkeley neighborhood yard before leaving for military service in World War II.

neighbor's roof, and they say they plan to cut it back a bit to allow more sun into the neighbor's yard.

Fall leaves in shades of red descend and are mulched into the lawn. Winter brings a massive silhouette of limbs.

"I photograph it every season," Kathie Sapiro says.

Trees such as the Sapiros' even have their own mythology. Neighborhood

whisper of leaves from the oak, its limbs spreading more than 80 feet across the yard, its shade providing peace and its roots running very deep.

Sweet gum, sweet shade

The phrase "dadgummit" may have emerged the first time someone stepped on a sweet gum tree seed pod in his bare feet.

The pods, called balls, are the downside of the often-seen yard tree in North Central Texas.

The upside? Just ask Terri McIlraith, owner of the largest sweet gum tree in the Metroplex. She'll tell you about the cooling shade, the pretty red and orange fall leaves and the graceful arch of branches, the ones the cats climb out on when they want to take higher-altitude naps.

A large shade tree can remove as much heat from the air as five medium-sized air conditioners, Fort Worth foresters say. When cars are parked in driveways, as are the McIlraiths', shade reduces fuel evaporation that contributes to air pollution. The trees also clean the air by acting like a filter to catch heavy-metal particulates and by "breathing" in carbon dioxide and releasing fresh oxygen. They reduce the ozone that leads to unhealthy air.

The sweet gum stands in the side yard of Terri and Michael McIlraith's Carter-Riverside neighborhood in northeast Fort



With their majestic branches and towering trunks, these record-setters bring tranquility and a sense of history to homes

Worth. It stands 55 feet high and its trunk, 7 feet in circumference, supports a spread of branches that is 47 feet wide.

It's a mere babe when compared with the largest sweet gum in the nation. That one towers 136 feet over land on the Neuse River in North Carolina.

Yet the McIlraiths' sweet gum still provides dropping rights. Foresters rate it as being slightly larger than the giant sweet gum standing in the Dallas yard of former Dallas Mayor Ron Kirk.

Kirk's sweet gum is a little taller than the McIlraith's, but height is not the only factor that foresters use to gauge tree size. Trunk girth and crown spread are considered, and the tree with the greatest "biomass" wins.

The McIlraiths' 60-some-year-old colossus drops plenty of annoying balls in the fall, forcing the couple to come up with creative solutions. The couple, who are organic gardeners, gather the balls and use them to mulch a 20-foot bed of crape myrtles lining their driveway.

For the McIlraiths, that's a reasonable price to pay for the

air-cooling, air-cleaning benefits of the tree.

A forest in the suburbs

In the midst of the manicured lawns of the suburban gentry and along the winding lanes of Colleyville sits a 4-acre lot with the largest known slash pine (49 feet tall) and the largest recorded black hickory (58 feet tall) in the Metroplex.

The lot is a tangle of shrubs bumping up against tall trees that shade a modest, cabinlike home.

"The trees make me feel rich," says Rosemary Fitch, retired botanist, who along with her husband, Tom, a retired geologist, own the lot packed with pecans, oaks, sweet gums, even bamboo, plus the two crowning glories — the very big trees.

"They are irreplaceable," agrees Tom Fitch, who moved with his family from Massachusetts to the Metroplex 22 years ago. "I've always liked trees. We could have moved here and bought a newer, fancier house or a house with a lot of trees. We chose the latter."

The trees on their lot are rare for the region. Black hickory is native in North Central Texas but very slow-growing. Tom Fitch figures it is at least 100 years old, if not far older. Its vibrant yellow autumn leaves create a 50-foot-wide canopy so outstanding that passers-by stop for a closer look and even pose for photographs in front of the tree.

The slash pine is a type more commonly seen in East Texas but has thrived for about 40 years on the sandy swath of soil that crosses the Fitches' property.

The front of their lot is so densely wooded that they need no curtains in their 1930s-era home, one built not only with thick pine interior wall panels but also with pine ceilings and hardwood floors.

The forest and woody cabin are a retreat, one that feels 100 miles away from the bustle of the burgeoning and well-clipped suburbs beyond the Fitches' drive.

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Daniel Sapiro, 7, climbs the base of the Texas red oak located in the front yard of his family's Fort Worth home.

The three trees grew into one, and now it is the largest Texas red oak recorded in the United States. (It's pictured above.)

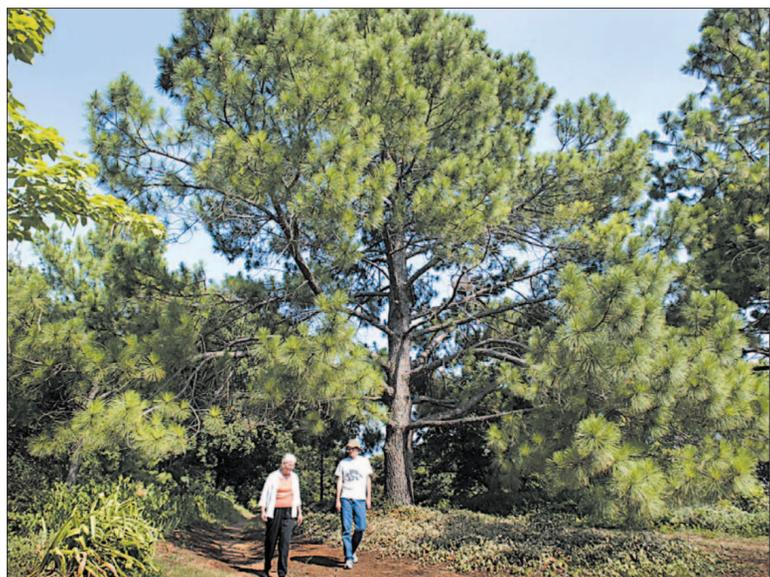
It's also one of about 20 trees listed on the city of Fort Worth Big Tree Registry. Cities and forestry regions across the nation keep track of leafy giants as a way of drawing attention to the importance of trees.

Big trees bring a sense of peace, a sense of permanence, a sense of history to a home.

"It gives you a sense of something established, something not transitory," says David Sapiro. He and wife Kathie are the current owners of the Hulsey house on Ward Parkway, where the big oak stands.

The Sapiros were considering moving to gain more room for the third child they are expecting. The couple checked out newer — less tree-rich — neighborhoods.

"When we left we felt tired and drained. It was hot, even desolate looking," Kathie Sapiro says.



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The slash pine is a type more commonly seen in East Texas but has thrived for about 40 years on the sandy swath of soil that crosses the Fitches' property in Colleyville.

Big trees of the Metroplex

Here's a sampling of champion trees on public property:

- Largest known mesquite in Texas, 46 feet high, 51 feet wide, with a 14-foot trunk, Will Rogers Coliseum grounds.
- Largest known jujube tree in Texas, 45 feet tall, 37 feet wide, with a 5-foot trunk, Fort Worth Botanic Garden.
- Largest known Southern magnolia in the Metroplex, 64 feet tall, 57 feet wide, with an 11-foot trunk, Fort Worth Botanic Garden.
- One of two green hawthorns tied for largest in Texas, 31 feet high and 36 feet wide, with a 4-foot trunk, Fort Worth Botanic Garden.

The Web site www.texasstreetrails.org maps the location of the champion trees at the Botanic Garden, and it posts links to sites that list the largest trees in Texas and the United States. (Click on "resources" and "Big Trees in the News.") You can also learn how to measure trees or nominate trees to the registries.

Or, to nominate a tree, call Melinda Adams with the city of Fort Worth Big Tree Registry, (817) 871-5705, or Courtney Blevins with the Texas Forest Service, (817) 926-8203.

Research bears her out. Trees are calming, concluded widely published studies by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the 1990s. Researchers found lower levels of crime in treed settings. Green spaces, wrote Frances Kuo and William Sullivan, reduce the mental fatigue that leads to a range of negative behavior, from "incivilities" to violence.

The Sapiros are re-considering the move, in no small part because of the peaceful and heavily treed Berkeley neighborhood and the majesty of the big oak.

Neighbors walk by and tell the Sapiros how much they love the Texas red oak. Kids climb it. Friends come over and photograph family portraits in front of the trunk, now about 6 feet in circumference.

The Sapiros trimmed it to prevent limbs from damaging a

legend has it that Hulsey planted one oak for himself, one for his wife and one for his son, Sam. The youthful oaks became entwined as they grew, making one inseparable tree.

Sam Hulsey says the symbolism of a sapling for each family member is something he never heard growing up, but he does agree that the oak is the living equivalent of a family seal.

"Trees do symbolize family and heritage," Sam Hulsey says. He lives in Fort Worth and on the family farm in Parker County, where his English grandfather planted English walnut trees before 1900. The walnuts still stand. And Sam Hulsey, now 72, still is planting trees on the farm.

Sam's father, Sam Hulsey, was 100 years old in 2000 when he lay on his deathbed in the Ward Parkway home, and from there he could hear the gentle



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Tom and Rosemary Fitch own 4 acres in the midst of a Colleyville suburb. Among this inner-city forest grows this black hickory, the largest in the Metroplex at 58 feet tall.