

# National Champion American Smoke Tree Rescued from Development

by Guy Sternberg

*A*s a national champion tree ever been transplanted? If you had asked that question before October 20th, 2000, the answer would have been no. The largest American smoke tree [*Cotinus obovatus*] ever measured has been relocated out of harm's way. It grows on the campus of Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, where it was probably planted in the 1800's.

When word got out that the smoke tree was in the path of a multi-million dollar university construction project, concerned alumni and scientists from around the world mounted a campaign to save the champion tree. The university responded to the call by transplanting the smoke tree to a secure, albeit obscure, site at the south edge of the campus. The move was completed between October 20th and 21st.

What is involved in a project of this magnitude? First, there's the preparation phase. This included evaluation to see if the project was physically feasible. Money was raised to fund the project and the influence of doubters was overcome. (One old Purdue forester actually suggested the tree was not worth saving because smoke trees have no great timber value!)

A new location was selected and prepared, with construc-

tion access, sub-surface drainage (smoke trees are very intolerant of poor drainage), irrigation, and a planting hole sufficient to accept the root ball. A travel route was mapped out to avoid weak pavements, bridges, and overhanging limbs and utilities. Overhead wires which couldn't be avoided were temporarily moved to make way for the tree's passage.

Next came the extraction phase. The tree had to be pruned and the

crown secured to prevent possible breakage during transport. The soil surrounding the root mass was peeled back. The remaining root-ball of soil, as big as a small backyard, was stabilized with heavy wrapping and cables, and pipes were driven under the entire root-ball. The crown was anchored to the pipes with cables for stability.

And finally, came the dramatic, oh-my-gosh phase. The tree, some 60 tons in weight and approximately 40-foot tall, was lifted by a cable sling connected to the platform of pipes onto a heavy trailer. Oversized-load placards were placed on pilot vehicles, and traffic was blocked off. The tree made its way down the road at a snail's pace to its new home, much in the fashion a house is moved. A special crane was required to load and unload the tree as well as several huge tractor-trailers. (It took two tractor-trailer rigs just to haul the counterweights for the 200-ton crane!) Once in position, the smoke tree was plucked gently from the trailer and lowered back into the ground.

With the tricky move completed, vigilance is the next step. Monitoring the tree's water and nutrient needs must continue for several years until the tree reestablishes its root system and begins to resume normal growth. Biostimulants



Relocating the National Champion American smoke tree [*Cotinus obovatus*] October 2000

and mycorrhizal inoculation may be helpful in bolstering the tree's vigor, and the damaged roots will need to be guarded against attack by fungal pathogens. Interpretive signs, mulch, and perhaps some site furniture such as benches or unobtrusive fencing will be needed. Then the tree can take its place of honor on the Purdue campus. It will be featured in university literature and website pages that describe the special trees on the campus.

If you would like to see the only national champion tree ever to be transplanted, choose a pretty day and drive to West Lafayette, Indiana. Follow State Street (Indiana Route 26) to Russell Avenue, turn south, and continue until you have crossed the railroad tracks. The smoke tree can be seen in the distance on your left, in a parkway south of the road next to the university shipping complex. There is parking available near the tree, and you can walk right up to it. Bring your camera!



***Guy Sternberg** is a registered landscape architect, a certified professional arborist, and a world-famous authority on oaks and ancient trees. He owns Starhill Forest, a private research arboretum in Petersburg, Illinois.*

*Mr. Sternberg will be teaching a program on managing nut trees in the landscape at the Chicago Botanic Garden on February 23rd from 8 a.m. to noon. For more information, contact Continuing Education Manager, Linda Jones, at 847-835-5440.#*

