

DSU professor leaves her legacy in trees

Yost's work helps make collection first accredited arboretum in Delaware

By Eleanor La Prade
Delaware State News

DOVER — Walking from the herbarium to the parking lot at Delaware State University, Dr. Susan Yost stopped to look at a northern catalpa tree.

"It was little," she said proudly. "Only three feet tall when we planted it."

She pointed to the long, thin fruit, "almost like cigars," and the big, heart-shaped leaves.

The catalpa is one of the 172 labeled trees and shrubs that make up the Delaware State University Arboretum.

In August, the collection at the university's main, 400-acre campus became the first accredited arboretum in Delaware — and also the only one at an historically black college or university.

The university's collection of trees and shrubs was evaluated by the ArbNet accreditation program based on a lengthy list of standards, Dr. Yost said, including planning, support, public access, programming and conservation.

Thanks in part to her hard work, though, the application was quickly approved and the campus is now listed as accredited in the Morton Register of Arboreta.

"She won't say it, but she was the driving force behind the arboretum," said Lou Calabrese, a volunteer at the herbarium.

"She did a lot of the watering herself and she did a lot of the weeding herself, a lot of the planting herself. Student workers and volunteers helped out."

From tree walk to arboretum

Dr. Yost, an educator at the university's herbarium, can tell you a story about almost every tree on campus.

The pawpaw tree, growing just outside the herbarium, produces the largest edible fruit in North America — it almost tastes like mangos and has the consistency of custard.

Pulp from the soapberry tree can make soap. The Franklinia, with its fragrant white flowers, is extinct in the wild.

"We have a monkey puzzle tree you should see. It's fascinating," she said last week. "They're just weird looking, big triangular spiny leaves."

For years, Dr. Yost has been leading nature walks around campus, to



Delaware State News/Dave Chambers
Delaware State University herbarium educator Dr. Susan Yost, right, poses with herbarium volunteer Lou Calabrese, both of Dover, next to a blackjack oak tree which is part of the school's arboretum Wednesday afternoon on campus.

encourage students to step outside and teach them about the trees.

Back in 2006, Dr. Yost and Mr. Calabrese decided to make the program official. They named it the "Campus Tree Walk" and marked 87 trees and shrubs with a 4-by-6-inch aluminum label.

Then, between 2010 and 2012, they planted 57 more trees and shrubs, including 35 new species, in part thanks to a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

With the money, they also labeled more trees and Dr. Yost wrote an accompanying booklet and helped design a brochure, a campus map listing the name and coordinates of each labeled tree.

In 2011, the university was recognized by the Arbor Day Foundation as a "Tree Campus USA" for their tree care, and in 2012, the Delaware State University Arboretum was formally designated.

Teachers at Delaware State have used the arboretum for classes in botany, dendrology, horticulture and even a "nature poetry walk" in literature.

Dr. Yost still organizes nature walks around campus. In May, she helped with "Woodland Classroom," a program for kids in kindergarten through third grade. She's also hosted Master Gardeners, Boy Scout troops and teachers.

Native and exotic trees

About 40 percent of the species on campus are native, although Dr. Yost has also brought in some unique non-

natives, including the monkey puzzle tree from the Andes and the umbrella-pine, a "living fossil" threatened in its native Japan.

But she hopes that visitors can learn to appreciate the native trees and the unique role that they play in the balance of Delaware's ecology.

For instance, "The tulip trees feeds the caterpillars of the tiger swallowtail butterfly," she said, "and the pawpaw here feeds the caterpillars of the zebra-swallowtail butterflies."

Any maybe passersby will notice and decide to grow their own beach plums, with their white flowers and edible fruit, or chinquapins, shrubby relatives of the American chestnut — both commonly overlooked natives.

Some of the native trees on campus recall the state's past; the landscape of Delaware has changed over the centuries, Dr. Yost said.

"In Delaware, it used to be all wooded, all forest and some wetlands, and now it's mostly cleared," she said.

New additions to campus include an American chestnut, once widespread but almost decimated in a chestnut blight, and the once-native scrub oak, which doesn't grow in the state anymore.

"We're not trying to reintroduce it, but we have an example of something that used to grow here that's now gone from Delaware," she said. "We need to protect our forests."

Since Delaware State University was founded in 1891, the larger trees are probably at least that old.

If You Go

Nature walk on the Arboretum trees

Oct. 17 at 1 p.m.

Meet in front of the Herbarium at the Washington Building at Delaware State University

For more information, contact Susan Yost at syost@desu.edu or 857-6452

Big Trees of Kent Co.

According to the Delaware Forest Service, the second biggest shingle oak in the state lives at Delaware State University.

Below are some local trees recorded in the Forest Service's "Big Trees of Delaware" guidebook as the biggest of their species in Delaware.

- American beech, 1700 N. DuPont Hwy., Dover (in a wooded lot behind Cedar Chase Apartments)
- American elm, The Green, Dover
- American hornbeam, 7320 Burnite Mill Rd., Felton
- Black oak, Eden Hill Farm, Dover
- Black walnut, Holy Cross Church, Dover
- English walnut, 39 South Main St., Camden
- Ginkgo, 959 Hazletville Rd., Wyoming
- Honeylocust, 100 Reese Ave., Harrington
- Kentucky coffeetree, NW corner of the Green, Dover
- Pignut hickory, 4976 Wheatleys Pond Rd., Smyrna
- River birch, Memorial Park, Dover
- Scarlet oak, Holy Cross Church, Dover
- Southern red oak, east of Rts. 13 and 14, Harrington
- Swamp chestnut oak, Eagles Nest Landing Rd., Smyrna
- Sweetgum, Dover Air Force Base, Dover

The arboretum's collection includes the second largest shingle oak in Delaware, Dr. Yost said, and a black walnut that towers in front of Delaware Hall, nearly four feet in diameter.

To Dr. Yost, learning about the trees builds knowledge and appreciation for them. They're worth studying for their stories.

"And [for] the beauty of the trees, in all seasons, the fall foliage and the spring flowers," she added.

Work and upkeep on the arboretum is done with the support of the herbarium, the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources and Cooperative Extension staff, student workers and volunteers.

A map of the arboretum are available at the herbarium and online at http://herbarium.desu.edu/page5/files/Arboretum_map_brochure_2012.pdf.

Staff writer Eleanor La Prade can be reached at 741-8242 or elaprade@newszap.com. Follow DSN Eleanor on Twitter.