

Marilyn Arnlund – Maple Grove Inventory Extraordinaire



By: Ashley Reichard

Let's start at the beginning.

When Marilyn was training to become a Tree Care Advisor in 2012, she really latched on to the idea that whatever topic she pursued for her Speak Out presentation, she would make it happen in Maple Grove. Marilyn chose to focus on Emerald Ash Borer and the importance of an inventory as this insect was gaining momentum in her community. After training, Marilyn sought out Frank, the city tree guy. She took time to talk to Frank and later, offered the idea to propose her intent for a tree inventory.

Frank agreed to hearing the proposal, offering to invite the city administrator to sit in as well. After her short proposal, Frank noted that it would be very important to see an inventory happen in Maple Grove, but wanted to get a bid first. The bids varied, but generally were around the \$50,000 range. Marilyn proposed to do it much cheaper by managing the inventory herself and using volunteers to collect the data. And to that, Frank said yes. After various negotiations, they decided the inventory would include public trees (sans parks) and would include an inventory of private, front yard trees to give a better picture of the true tree composition for the roughly 36 square mile city.

In 2012, post-Core Course, Marilyn spent nearly 600 hours planning, finding resources and sponsors, creating training materials, and piloting the inventory with the help of 6 very dedicated volunteers. Marilyn reflects back, knowing that using this small pilot group did wonders as far as fixing team. And with that, 2013 began the first official year of the inventory program. But how did she get these volunteers? Advertising. Lots of advertising. The only restriction being that it had to be free. Marilyn posted anywhere she could find that people

Advertising Tips

- Newsletters
- The city paper
- The park and recreation brochures
- Signage on the park trees
- Through other organization's websites (e.g. Tree Care Advocate and Master Gardener)
- On city buildings
- Via local TV broadcast
- To big businesses

would see or hear. And with nearly 100 volunteers getting involved over the 5 years, you can see her efforts were a success.

Resources were another key factor in the inventory process, especially to house all of the data collected. What was needed to get the inventory done? Many things. Safety vests, folders, reference information, and a data collection system. After some short advice from Gary Johnson regarding finding sponsors, Marilyn pursued local businesses. For example, one of the local businesses purchased safety vests for use by volunteers in exchange for some advertising on the back of these vests. But let's talk technology. The inventory started with paper, but almost immediately went digital through phone and tablet applications. One gem the group found was GIS Cloud and they received a very good deal in turn for some beta testing. This app is still in use today for all forestry related volunteer work in Maple Grove and it couldn't be easier to use. City staff managed the technology and provided technical support, plus they were a great help in attending every monthly meeting (we'll talk more about that later).

Throughout the course of the inventory, the process was always evolving to meet unexpected challenges or simply the discovery of more productive means to the end. One challenge was with the need to survey private front yards and ensuring safety for the residents and employees of those properties. In the end, each volunteer was required to apply for the volunteer position and they had to complete a background check. Additionally, every volunteer was instructed not to survey within 3 feet of the foundation of a property and to not go past fence lines to ensure safety for all of Maple Grove's residents. These precautions, plus sending letters to notify homeowners, ensured a smooth and productive process for everyone involved.

Quick Tips to Retain Volunteers

- Train for all
- Set up support meetings
- Find a co-conspirator
- Welcome all interested volunteers
- Check in with new volunteers
- Partner volunteers up
- Recognize your volunteers

Now that we know how to find volunteers, how to tackle resources, and how to address challenges, let's take a look at how to motivate and retain these volunteers. Marilyn doesn't have a tried and true formula, but here a few things she did to encourage involvement:

1. *Train for all* - Sometimes that means putting a class on for a large group to just a few people. Giving everyone the education and your time can really motivate them to stay involved.

2. *Set up support meetings* – Every month like clockwork, Marilyn would hold two monthly open house meetings, one in the afternoon and one in the evening, so that she could answer any and all questions. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to how many people showed up (sometime one and sometimes 20), but in the end the regular support was a great tool for volunteers.
3. Find a co-conspirator – Marilyn had a very busy and full 2017 covering another position at work and she had to rely on another great volunteer, Laura Feierbend. Laura took on the responsibility of assisting to train and support new inventory volunteers when Marilyn simply couldn't step away from work.
4. Welcome volunteers from all around – This inventory was not limited to just Maple Grove residents. The opportunity was available for anyone interested, with a handful of the most committed volunteers being from communities like Richfield and Plymouth.
5. Check in – Marilyn noted that she could have done more with this, but checking in, especially with new volunteers, can be a great way to build confidence and to learn why someone may not be getting involved in the field.
6. Partner volunteers up – Volunteers would collect data in pairs so one person can be entering data while one person evaluates the tree. But pairing up like minds can get the job done much quicker. For example, there was an existing volunteer whose partner was no longer involved. Marilyn paired this individual up with a new volunteer that used to do the same day work, and those two become unstoppable in the field. Some of their numbers were almost unbelievable because of how efficiently they worked.
7. Recognition – At the monthly meetings, Marilyn would review the stats from last month, offer little prizes (which many volunteers said were not necessary), and recognized the go-getters of the month and their accomplishments. Rewarding those who do great work can do wonders for commitment.

The Maple Grove tree inventory wrapped up at the end of 2017 and now Marilyn is in the process of analyzing the data and putting together the final report. One surprise so far is that the amount of maple trees is nearly double that of ash within Maple Grove city limits! In time, we will see more about the composition of canopy, but already the inventory has done wonders to influence the latest tree plantings in the city. You can expect to hear more when Marilyn presents about the Maple Grove inventory and how to tackle the challenge of money at the 2018 Shade Tree Short Course.

And as Marilyn noted, she is glad to share anything that she has done if you are looking to conduct an inventory in your community. And she means anything. But maybe wait until she retires later this year and has more time!

Marilyn's Tips for a Successful Inventory

- Realize how much time it takes, as you will spend countless hours planning, organizing, teaching, collecting, and refining.
- Volunteers remember and enjoy the training process over anything else – make it fun, accessible, and engaging.
- Not everything will be perfect and by making small adjustments in the process and training, your inventory will evolve to better fit the needs of the volunteers in your community and you will see more success.
- Connect with all stakeholders. Consider city staff, tree boards or committees, city administrators, the public, etc.
- Find sponsors to help share the costs, used office supplies at a fraction of the price, and free avenues to advertise.
- Know that you will meet countless committed and phenomenal people along the way.
- Find someone who has done this before. People are always willing to share and you don't have to reinvent the wheel. Just modify the wheel for the needs of your community.

Congratulations on your hard work, dedication, and achievement, Marilyn!