

2010 July 14 Alamosa Trees
by Marilyn Loser

Age, playgrounds, and squirrels impact Cole Park

“Look at that squirrel! He wants my chicken sandwich; he doesn’t want your baloney,” exclaimed a picnicker one day in Cole Park. Does he realize that squirrels pose a threat greater than sandwich thievery?

“Don’t chop down any of these trees!” cried the jogger as Arborist Tom Eskew, Director of Parks and Recreation Heinz Bergann, and I studied the trees along the paved park path. It was a passionate, if unreasonable sentiment. Eskew has 29 years experience as an arborist, owns the Heartwood West Tree Service in Durango, and did walk-through evaluations of Cole and Boyd Parks.

Unfortunately, park trees can’t take care of themselves. People who read this column know that most of Cole Park’s grand trees were planted in 1938. Many are still viable, others need a lot of work. A couple of trees had serious internal decay, so were felled this past week. See photos by Bergann.



Felled Tree 1: Hazardous, hollow core.



Felled Tree 2: Exterior view – cavity probably due to long-ago pruned branch (left): illuminated interior view showing cavity (middle): metal tape measure easily plunged into cavity more than 2 feet (right).

Trees in the playground and other graveled areas are trying to survive in very compacted, dry soil. According to Eskew, “This is preventing the trees from proper uptake of nutrients.” The trees were planted long before the playground was installed and they originally lived in a grassy, watered environment.

No one argues against the wonderful playground. However, in our arid climate, it is difficult to maintain large trees in graveled, non-irrigated areas. We can buy some time by aerating the soil in these areas and providing the trees with more nutrients. But we need to develop a long-term solution that includes giving these trees more water. Eskew said a number of the trees will need to be removed within 10 years. Remember, tree roots are mostly in the top two feet of soil and extend at least as far as the drip line. If you have any ideas for viably combining shade trees and playgrounds, please let me know at Marilyn@AlamosaTrees.net.

A lot of deadwood needs to be trimmed around the park, especially high in the tree tops. On Monday, a bucket truck was busy near the playground. Some deadwood is natural, but squirrels and other pests are seriously impacting the canopy in the north end of the park.

Look up at the canopy and you can see a lot of smaller, dead limbs. Squirrels often munch the bark all the way around smaller branches, causing them to die.

You may think squirrels have been here forever, but actually they were introduced fairly recently, and their only predators are the occasional dog, cat, raptor, or car.

My conversations with long-term Alamosa residents turned up no definitive information on when squirrels arrived in Alamosa, but I did hear one story: a lady from Illinois noticed there weren't any squirrels in Alamosa, brought in a mating pair, and released them on the Adams State Campus. No one knew the exact year, but estimates range from the late 60's to early 70's.

There are a lot of squirrels in town now; a number in Cole Park are very aggressive. Some people think these critters are very cute and like to feed them. They are not in balance with nature and I see them as a town pest, even more so than deer.

In my mind I can see a childhood picture-book image of a squirrel sitting on a tree branch munching on a nut and another squirrel hiding one for future eating. This was about as close as I got to squirrels growing up in the arid heights of Albuquerque, NM. Occasionally I'd see a squirrel in the mountains on family outings and thought it wonderful.

Neither Albuquerque nor Alamosa has much in the way of nut trees – so what do squirrels eat? These days in Alamosa if I walk down 2nd street on trash collection day I can easily count 30 in one block scampering in and over trash containers. According to people in the area, the critters also decimate their vegetable gardens. And don't forget chicken sandwiches. Gone is the childhood image; now I see rats with big tails.

The good news about Cole Park is that we have a beautiful park and have the opportunity to keep it that way. As a start, the Department of Parks and Recreation and interested citizens will be planting 26 new trees this summer, provided by a Colorado Tree Coalition Grant in combination with Alamosa park funds. Want to help with planting? Drop me an email at Marilyn@AlamosaTrees.net. And by the way, the planting of the new trees is not dependent upon the fate of the proposed city complex.

When looking at a grand old tree that has been declining the last few years and leafed out very late this year, Eskew said, “Emotionally you might want to save it. Practically, it doesn’t have a chance.”