At Rosecliff, a Forum Unites Scientists, Civic Leaders, and Concerned Citizens to Save Newport's Iconic Trees

Christian Winthrop·**May 12, 2025**

A near-capacity crowd gathered at Rosecliff last Thursday evening as scientists, arborists, conservationists and civic leaders convened for "Iconic Trees of Newport II," a public forum dedicated to addressing the mounting threats to the city's urban forest, most urgently beech leaf disease (BLD).

Organized by the Preservation Society of Newport County in partnership with Bartlett Tree Experts, the Newport Tree Conservancy, the City of Newport, Salve Regina University and the Aquidneck Land Trust, the free event marked a follow-up to last June's popular "Iconic Trees" forum. This year's edition focused on research updates, management strategies, and collaborative efforts to preserve the city's distinctive tree canopy.

"We are very proud to be combining forces with so many distinguished groups in this ongoing effort to combat not just beech leaf disease, but also other issues facing

Newport's arboreta," said Trudy Coxe, CEO of the Preservation Society. "This is a complex challenge and educating the public through forums like this is essential."

Speakers included Scott Wheeler, Superintendent of Parks, Grounds and Forestry for the City of Newport; Natasha Harrison, Executive Director of the Newport Tree Conservancy; Joe Verstandig, the Conservancy's Living Collections Manager; Terry Sullivan, Executive Director of the Aquidneck Land Trust; Jeff Curtis, Director of Gardens and Landscapes at the Preservation Society; and Jim Donahue, the Society's Landscape Curator. They were joined by a team from Bartlett Tree Experts, including President and Chief Operating Officer Jim Ingram, and scientists Dr. Andrew Loyd, Dr. Matthew Borden and Dr. Beth Brantley.

"Newport's trees are integral to our quality of life, our economy and an essential tool to mitigate the impacts of climate change on local flooding and extreme heat," Wheeler said. "We have made progress replanting our public lands, but we are losing ground in our neighborhoods and in the battle to protect our trees against new tree pests and diseases. My hope is that this forum will give people ideas on how they can aid ongoing efforts to preserve our trees and to restore Newport's tree canopy."

Topics ranged from the diversity of Newport's arboreta — particularly the cultivated and wild beech populations — to treatment options for beech leaf disease and strategies for managing wild beech on conservation land. The forum also detailed the Preservation Society's work combating BLD on its properties.

Beech leaf disease, first identified in Ohio in 2012, is caused by a microscopic nematode that feeds inside beech leaves. The disease has since spread across 15 states and into Ontario, Canada. It poses a lethal threat to both American and European beeches, which are prevalent in Newport's historic landscapes.

"The urban forest is presented with unending challenges, from climate change to a series of disease and insect problems," said Donahue. "This coalition is coming together to address these issues. The forum on May 8 represents the latest in our ongoing efforts."

Scientists at Bartlett Tree Research Laboratories shared new developments in treatment methods, including a root flare injection effective for large trees and a foliar application suited to smaller ones.

"Understanding the significance of beech history, culture, concerns, and management is one of the most important things an arborist can know to be a good steward of the environment," said Ingram.

Dr. Loyd, who has led Bartlett's beech disease research for eight years, described the experience as both frustrating and ultimately hopeful. "At times in the past eight years

while researching beech leaf disease, I've felt as if there would be no hope for management," he said. "But through painstaking, tedious work we have now been able to find two successful treatment options: a root flare injection suitable for large trees, and a foliar application program designed for smaller trees. Although frustrating at times, researching BLD has been a very rewarding process."

"We have not stopped there," added Dr. Borden. "We are constantly improving our methods and thinking long-term for solutions of how to balance efficacy with environmental stewardship."

The Newport Tree Conservancy emphasized the importance of collaboration in preserving the city's arboreal heritage. "The Newport Tree Conservancy is committed to the health of our urban forest," said Harrison. "We are fortunate to partner with the City of Newport, Bartlett Tree Experts, the Preservation Society and Aquidneck Island Land Trust, who are dedicated to working together to ensure that the iconic trees in our city continue to flourish. Together we are planting for the future."