

Needham Conservation Commission Guidelines for Reviewing Tree Removal Projects

The Needham Conservation Commission is frequently asked to allow the removal of trees which are dead or damaged/diseased and pose a threat to private or public property (hazard trees), or which are within the footprint of proposed construction. The Commission primarily reviews such requests under the Wetland Protection Act and Needham Wetland Bylaw regulations in the context of Requests for Determination of Applicability and Notices of Intent. The bylaw regulations at Section 1.02(4)(e) state that “individual tree removal when evidence is provided by a Certified Arborist showing that the tree is in poor health and/or poses a hazard” is a minor activity exempt from regulation, when the tree is within a Buffer Zone.

These Guidelines have been developed to provide a consistent approach to tree removal that protects the wetland functions and values provided by trees within wetlands, floodplains, Buffer Zones, or Riverfront Area.

Needham is designated a “Tree City USA” by the Arbor Day Foundation, a designation that shows that the community cares about its environment and the quality of life. Trees are an important part of Needham’s visual landscape, as well as providing cleaner air, shadier streets, and habitat for birds and other wildlife. The shade produced by trees in summer reduces temperatures and can reduce energy usage and air conditioning costs, important factors to a Green Community. With respect to wetland functions and values, trees provide shade that maintains a favorable microclimate for wetland plants, reptiles and amphibians, and insects. Trees provide wildlife habitat features which include food, shelter, nesting habitat, migratory habitat, and perching habitat (for predatory and insect-eating birds). Dead limbs and hollow trunks provide cavities which may be used by small mammals and birds for nests, dens, or shelter. The leaves shed by deciduous trees in the fall provide a valuable source of nutrients and organic matter that supports the texture and fertility of wetland soils.

In recognition of these important values, the Commission requires that wherever feasible, a “snag” at least 6 feet high shall be retained when a diseased, dead, or hazardous tree, 6-inches or greater diameter at breast height, is removed. The snag provides valuable wildlife habitat. The Commission also requires that all healthy trees removed within a wetland resource area (including the 100-foot Buffer Zone) be replaced within the 100-foot Buffer Zone and/or 200-foot Riverfront Area, at a minimum 2:1 ratio (two new trees for each tree removed), with native tree species (see approved Replacement Tree List). The replacement trees must be a minimum 1 1/2-inch caliper. Although replacement trees are preferred, an Applicant may propose wildlife habitat replacement with high wildlife value native shrub species in lieu of, or in addition to, trees. Shrubs shall be proposed at no less than a 4:1 ratio (four shrubs for each tree removed). The following list provides guidance on what tree and shrub species are acceptable. Other native plants may be proposed beyond those listed in this document. Final approval is subject to review by the Conservation Commission or their designee.

If replacement tree or shrub plantings are not feasible on-site (after review by the Conservation Commission), an Applicant may opt to contribute to the Town of Needham Conservation Trust Fund. The Conservation Trust Fund was established in 1963 and is used for the promotion and development of the natural resources and for the protection of watershed resources of the Town of Needham. Contributions to the Trust Fund shall be in an amount equitable to that of the estimated cost of replacing the lost trees and includes the cost of the replacement trees and the man hours required to install, care for and monitor the trees. Replacement tree prices are to be provided to the Conservation Commission by the Applicant from a reputable tree nursery licensed to operate in Massachusetts, as approved by the Conservation Commission.

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Replacement Trees – Native To New England

Wetter Areas	Drier Areas
<i>Acer rubrum</i> (red maple)	<i>Acer saccharum</i> (sugar maple)
<i>Acer saccharoides</i> (silver maple)	<i>Betula papyrifera</i> (paper birch)
<i>Betula lenta</i> (sweet/black birch)	<i>Fagus grandifolia</i> (American beech)
<i>Betula nigra</i> (river birch)	<i>Fraxinus pennsylvanica</i> (green ash)
<i>Betula populifolia</i> (gray birch)	<i>Juniperus virginiana</i> (eastern red cedar)
<i>Chamaecyparis thyoides</i> (Atlantic white cedar)	<i>Liriodendron tulipifera</i> (tulip tree)
<i>Nyssa sylvatica</i> (tupelo, black gum)	<i>Pinus strobus</i> (white pine)
<i>Quercus bicolor</i> (swamp white oak)	<i>Platanus occidentalis</i> (sycamore)
<i>Tsuga canadensis</i> (Canada hemlock)*	<i>Prunus serotina</i> (black cherry)
	<i>Quercus alba</i> (white oak)
	<i>Quercus coccinea</i> (scarlet oak)
	<i>Quercus palustris</i> (pin oak)
	<i>Quercus rubra</i> (red oak)
* <i>Tsuga canadensis</i> should only be planted if a long-term monitoring plan (approved by the Conservation Commission) is in place to control woolly adelgid.	<i>Quercus velutina</i> (black oak)
	<i>Tilia americana</i> (basswood)

High Wildlife Value Shrubs – Native to New England

Wetter Areas	Drier Areas
<i>Alnus incana</i> (<i>rugosa</i>) (Speckled Alder)	<i>Amelanchier</i> spp. (serviceberry)
<i>Clethra alnifolia</i> (Sweet Pepperbush)	<i>Cornus alternifolia</i> (alternate-leaved dogwood)
<i>Cornus amomum</i> (Silky Dogwood)	<i>Cornus racemosa</i> (gray dogwood)
<i>Ilex verticillata</i> (Winterberry Holly)	<i>Corylus americana</i> (American hazelnut)
<i>Salix discolor</i> (Pussy Willow)	<i>Hamamelis virginiana</i> (witch hazel)
<i>Vaccinium corymbosum</i> (Highbush Blueberry)	<i>Photinia melanocarpa</i> (black chokeberry)
<i>Viburnum dentatum</i> (Northern Arrowwood)	<i>Viburnum trilobum</i> (American cranberrybush)