Arborists Give Back, Helping Keep Riverfront Trails Safe and Healthy





GREAT BARRINGTON, Nov. 4, 2026 — The work of caring for a community's natural resources often takes a village. On Wednesday, Nov. 4, that village included 22 professional arborists, a local land conservancy, a botanical garden, and a community food cooperative, all coming together for a day of service along Great Barrington's Housatonic River.

T asion was the annual Arborist Day, sponsored by Berkshire Botanical Garden, which brought tog er arborists from across the Berkshires to donate their professional skills to the Great Barrington

Land Conservancy's River Walk and Riverfront Trail.

Beginning at 8 a.m., crews removed hazardous trees and branches and selectively pruned others to promote their health and longevity. The work was especially important along these popular pedestrian routes, where public safety and preservation of the natural landscape go hand in hand.

“These local arborists made a huge difference today,” said Joe Maleady, project leader for the Riverfront Trail. “We are extremely grateful for their donation of tree care, which will help to keep our trails safe and our trees healthy.”

For the Great Barrington Land Conservancy (GBLC), a volunteer- and donor-supported nonprofit dedicated to caring for local trails and natural resources, the contribution was much more than a day of tree maintenance.

“I would say that this is an amazing gift to the community,” said Christine Ward, GBLC president and director of the River Walk project. “GBLC is a volunteer donor-based organization, and yet it is our responsibility to care for these community trails. These belong to us through easements. Some people think these are a town trail. We get no funding from the town. We have to raise what we need to hire contractors, and most of our trail maintenance is managed through volunteers.”

Ward said the donated professional services make a substantial difference in the Conservancy's ability to fulfill that responsibility.

“This gift of a service day is so incredibly powerful," she said. "I can't express my gratitude enough."

Because the work took place in an environmentally sensitive area, it was reviewed by the Great Barrington Conservation Commission's conservation agent and approved through an emergency certification under the Wetlands Protection Act. Arborists were briefed on the applicable agreements and requirements before beginning work.

The day's objectives were straightforward but important: Remove hazardous limbs and trees that could threaten trail users, and improve the structure and health of selected trees through careful pruning.

The setting presented some unusual challenges for the crews. Unlike a traditional work site with easy access for large trucks and equipment, the trails follow a long, narrow corridor alongside the river. Much of the work required arborists and their equipment to travel in on foot, with limited access for machinery.

For Tom Ingersoll of Ingersoll Land Care in Sheffield, a Berkshire Botanical Garden trustee and one of Arborist Day's co-founders, that was part of what made this year's project particularly meaningful — and fun.

“It's funny. It's like 90 percent social, 50 percent professional. There's got to be a Yogi Berra-ism about Arborist Day,” Ingersoll said with a laugh.

But he also recognized that the riverfront location offered a special opportunity to connect professional

tree care with the natural environment.

“This one's unique because the work site this time is not a school, it's not a museum, but at the same time, it's so mission perfect because it's nature, and here we are, these humans interacting with the wild and especially the river,” he said.

With limited vehicle access and the importance of maintaining a safe pedestrian pathway, the arborists relied on their professional expertise, coordination and specialized equipment, including a spider lift.

“We have to walk in,” Ingersoll explained. “We're not bringing in these big bucket trucks. ... It's just kind of ironic that we have to be pedestrians to do it.”

“We are so happy to donate this day to these well-used community trails,” he added.

Ingersoll organized this year's service day with Kieran Yaple of Bartlett Tree Service. Participating companies included Ingersoll Land Care, Bartlett Tree Experts, Steinert Tree Care, Kelley Brothers, Arbor Services, Fenton Brook Property Services, and Whalen Nursery.

A Tradition of Professional Service

Arborist Day began more than two decades ago as an effort to address Berkshire Botanical Garden's need for professional tree care. The idea originated with the garden's former Director of Horticulture Dorthe Hviid, along with arborists Ron Yaple, Ken Gooch and Ingersoll.

Recognizing the need for professional attention to the Garden's trees, the group reached out to colleagues in the industry and established what would become a lasting tradition.

“After the first Arborist Day on the BBG campus, the group then reached out to other area non-profits, schools and museum properties to offer the services of as many as 25 professionals and their equipment,” Ingersoll said.

Over the years, Arborist Day has brought donated tree care to a wide range of Berkshire institutions and community properties, including The Mount, Construct's Pine Woods Condominiums, The Bidwell House, Monument Mountain Regional High School, Gould Farm, Brookside Manor, Hebert Arboretum, and the Norman Rockwell Museum.

The annual gathering is also an opportunity for professionals from different companies to share knowledge, strengthen relationships and learn from one another. This year's educational component featured Dr. Brian Kane of the University of Massachusetts, who presented on important aspects of climbing and rigging safety, including tie-in points, ropes, and the strength characteristics of different wood species. The presentation was eligible for continuing education credits.

Berkshire Botanical Garden continued its longstanding tradition of supporting the volunteer arborists by providing morning refreshments. In appreciation for the day's work, GBLC arranged a warm lunch, while the Berkshire Food Co-op generously provided the luncheon and meeting space. The Conservancy also

provided a stipend for the day's guest speaker.

Caring for a Community Resource

The River Walk and Riverfront Trail are two interconnected GBLC-managed public resources along the Housatonic River in Great Barrington. The River Walk follows the river's west bank between Cottage Street and Bridge Street, with upstream and downstream sections connected by Dresser Avenue and River Street. The newer Riverfront Trail extends public access to previously difficult-to-reach stretches of the river.

Envisioned by GBLC and local planners over several decades, the Riverfront Trail began construction in September 2019 and was completed a year later, following the cooperation of several property owners and support from public and private funding sources.

Visitors can explore wetlands, wildlife habitats, bird-viewing areas, and historic agricultural and urban landmarks. A 20-foot footbridge is among its features. Together, the trails provide an important public connection to the Housatonic, while requiring ongoing attention and stewardship to remain safe and welcoming.

For Ward, the annual Arborist Day service project embodies exactly the kind of community partnership that makes this work possible.

“This day is a stellar example of the power of community service,” she said.

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