

“People don’t miss a tree until it’s gone, they never do.”

An Interview with Gary Unger



By: Ashley Reichard

The first time I met Gary Unger, I was spending my time getting to know a handful of current Tree Care Advisors to learn more about the program and more about their volunteer experiences. Gary kindly agreed to meet me for lunch to talk and get to know one another. From that first get together, I feel like Gary and I have been attached at the hip. Gary and I were due for another semi-regular get together, so this time I thought I would interview him and share more about his experiences as a Tree Care Advisor.

What inspired you to become a Tree Care Advisor?

As I begin every interview, I like to see why folks get involved and what inspired them to participate in the Tree Care Advisor Core Course. Before becoming a Tree Care Advisor, Gary Unger was an active Master Gardener in Ramsey County. He thought this would be a great opportunity that would open up new avenues and to learn about a topic he never thought much about. “It’s one of the more interesting things I’ve ever done.” Since becoming an advisor in 2005, Gary has helped with an array of volunteer opportunities ranging from Q&A booths to planning planting projects in Ramsey County.

What activities do you devote most of your time to?

Gary’s favorite way to volunteer is to staff Q&A booths. “Everyone has questions, they just don’t think to find the answer or don’t think their problem is a problem until someone is there and it’s convenient.” One of the things Gary enjoys most is that people are generally fun to talk with and everyone has a question, however some people just need to get on the topic of trees before they think to ask their questions. And having a good resource can help here. One highly recommended resource from Gary is the Purdue Tree Doctor. References make everything easier and having a compact resource in your pocket comes in handy often, especially when addressing tree identification, common insects, and diseases. As many of us have seen this year, the public had a lot of questions about tar spot and Japanese beetle and having pictures on your phone and available makes answering questions that much easier. As Gary mentioned, these are instances where “it’s neat to be able to say your tree isn’t dying.”

What is your favorite Tree Care Advisor volunteer experience and why?

A few years ago, Gary was looking for ways to fill his education hours and had found out about a talk that Ed Hayes was doing at Fort Snelling. This was his favorite education event because it was a hands-on session about damaged and dangerous trees and how to identify them in the landscape. A prime example was when the group walked up to a tree that they would core to learn about the true structure of the tree. This particular tree was 37 inches in diameter and after coring, the group found out the inner 26 inches of the tree was completely hollow. Throughout the entire class, Ed shared about how to properly identify these dangerous trees and what to look for without any equipment. It is important to be looking out for these trees for the safety of the public and for the good of the urban forest. Gary later noted that cities try their best to find these damaged or dangerous trees, but they can't always catch them all. As Tree Care Advisors, it is beneficial to understand this topic in order to help keep your community safe and healthy.

What is your next big project?

For the last year, Gary has been working to come up with a plan for the Ramsey Lions Club to get involved with an Arbor Day planting. At first, this was a plan to plant deciduous trees near ash that were soon to be removed. But after more thinking, Gary has a plan to plant a grove of fruit trees on the Ramsey County Fair Grounds. The big picture would be to harvest these fruit trees for sale or use by the Lions Club and to use as an educational resource at the Ramsey County State Fair. Of course, this will take some planning with the county to make sure the site is well prepared for a successful planting and to make sure that there is a way to maintain and care for these trees for years to come. Let's all cross our fingers for Gary and hope that the plan goes through and planting can take place next spring for Arbor Day.

Now, before this interview is over, I would like to recognize Gary for his great work as a Tree Care Advisor and his work with the State Fair Booth. Gary is someone who is willing to attend planning meetings with Gary Johnson and myself, meet up to delegate tasks, spends extra time to set up the tree and display pieces at the fair, and helps to take everything down afterwards. Plus, Gary is happy to split the unfilled booth shifts with me so I don't have to take all of the remaining shifts. His support is priceless during such a busy time of the year. Needless to say, Gary is a significant player in making sure the State Fair Booth is successful every year (and keeping me sane during the chaos) and I want to make sure that he gets the recognition he deserves.

Thank you so much for all that you do Gary!