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Subject: Opinion | On Trees and Democracy: An Arborist's Open Letter to Herschel Walker | Joe Lamb
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Warning: This email originated from outside the City of Albany. Think before you click!

Dear City Council and Commission Members:

This powerful piece was written by local arborist Joe Lamb, a founding member and part owner of the well known Berkeley Tree Care firm Brende and Lamb. We urgently need to consider these facts when we, as a City, decide how to protect and support our local trees. Thank you for reading this.

<https://www.commondreams.org/views/2022/09/07/trees-and-democracy-arborists-open-letter-herschel-walker>



"I don't want to tell the ghost of my grandfather," writes Lamb, "that America has lost the intelligence and courage necessary to defeat the monsters we face today." (Photo: Andrea Pistolesi/Getty Images)

On Trees and Democracy: An Arborist's Open Letter to Herschel Walker

The \$1.5 billion in the IRA for urban forestry will improve the lives of many, many people. It will also be a step toward environmental justice.



JOE LAMB

September 7, 2022

Dear deniers of the importance of trees (I'm looking at you, Herschel Walker),

As an arborist with 37 years' experience taking care of trees, I take issue with one of your attacks on the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). Your casual claim that "**we have too many trees**" could not be further from the truth. As someone who has pruned, planted, and doctored trees in the urban forest for over three decades, I want to testify that trees are not the enemy; in fact, they are our allies. Especially in poor neighborhoods, we don't have nearly enough of them.

We need politicians who understand that one way we can address climate change and fight environmental

racism is to plant and nurture trees.

Enemies do exist, but who are they really? In the 1930s and 40s, America's enemies included the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and the global spread of supremacist fascism. Back then, trees helped us defeat those evil monsters. America is fighting similarly evil enemies now—entrenched poverty, the Climate Catastrophe, and yet another round of supremacist fascism. Some monsters change shape, reappear, and must be defeated by every generation. To see how trees helped us win those battles in the past—even the battle against fascism, I lost family in that war—let's look at one inspiring chapter of America's arboreal history.

But first, a little history lesson about history. There's lots of blah blah blah these days about not wanting to acknowledge embarrassing parts of our all-too-human past, as if anything but a Disneyesque fairy-princess-history is too scary for some folks. The denial of uncomfortable history is dishonest but understandable (who really likes looking at past mistakes?), but there is also a willful ignorance about amazingly positive parts of our history, about the times in which people really did come together against great odds, about stories in which Americans overcame differences and worked for the common good. This denial of the angels in our history is more than a little strange. We need to get over denying our successes, especially now that climate change is supercharging ever bigger killer **wildfires**, killer **hurricanes**, and killer **heat waves**. You may remember that old saw, "Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it." Time for an update: those who don't know history are unable to repeat its successes. We need to remember with great pride when Americans worked together to heal a badly wounded land, to lift millions out of poverty, and to soundly defeat the genocidal ideology of supremacism.

During that big American success story, my family were farmers in Oklahoma. The Depression years were tragically hard times. As was happening throughout much of the Great Plains, some of the most fertile land in Oklahoma was drying up and blowing away. It was like an Old Testament plague had been loosed on the country for the sin of abusing that most divine of gifts, the gift of a natural world capable of feeding us, clothing us, and providing us with shelter.

While riding a train south from Montana through the devastated Great Plains, **Franklin Delano Roosevelt** witnessed a hill blowing away. As his train pushed its way through the eco-disaster of his time, FDR, a man who believed in his country—a man who was not afraid of creativity—came up with a plan to beat the Dust Bowl. FDR envisioned a **wall of trees** stretching from Montana down into Texas, trees that would form a living shield to protect the fragile topsoil from the killer winds. It was an audacious plan, one requiring teamwork between the federal government, state governments, and local citizens. Back in Washington, in cooperation with the states, the plan was modified from a single wall to a series of

strategically placed shorter walls. The plan needed dreamers, scientists, politicians, and lots of engaged citizens. Each had their proper role. We have those same types of people today, we need to support them to work together.

I'm proud to say that my grandfather, Jo Ab Lamb, was one of those engaged citizens. To protect his land along the Washita River in Oklahoma, Jo Ab was one of many people who, collectively and with help from the government, planted hundreds of millions of trees to **shield the land** from drought and wind. Talk about faithful allies! Those trees formed a living shield with their bodies. People came together inside and outside of the government. The plan worked, for Jo Ab and for the nation. Jo Ab's farm prospered. America healed the Dust Bowl. America lifted itself out of the Depression. You could say that people and trees came together, for the good of the forest and for the good of the nation.

As we look at the daunting task of taming climate change, it makes sense to listen to some of the better angels of our own past. The Inflation Reduction Act was created in remembrance of the time when the Civilian Conservation Corps employed over 2.5 million people in environmental restoration, including tree planting. The CCC tamed the Dust Bowl and lifted millions out of poverty. We need to remember that our government worked, that, at least in that instance, we became a government of the people acting in the people's interest. We need to remember that we can learn from and repeat the successes of our past. We can do the same again. In some senses, if we fail to do so we not only fail our children, we fail our ancestors. If we don't act with the same courage and conviction of our ancestors, our children will bear the worst effects of climate catastrophe. I don't want to tell the ghost of my grandfather that America has lost the intelligence and courage necessary to defeat the monsters we face today.

But what does all this Dust Bowl tree planting stuff have to do with the real and current problems of poverty in the inner city? Great question. I'm so glad you asked. And the answer is, much more than you imagine. We healed our wounded land once; we can do it again. But to heal our wounded sky today we need to free up, as the brilliant writer/thinker/activist adrienne maree brown says, our powers of imagination. That's the real battlefield, the realm of our collective imagination. We imagined an end to the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, we imagined how to accomplish those seemingly impossible tasks, and we imagined that we could defeat fascism at home and on the other side of the world.

So, to imagine how cities can survive as the sky gets hotter, let's look at a little more arboreal science, this time focusing on what we know about the urban forest.

1. Neighborhoods with more tree cover have higher **real estate value**. Want to improve the economic well-being of poor neighborhoods? Plant and maintain street trees. Tree planting raises home equity. In poor neighborhoods, home equity, the middle class's main source of

wealth, was all but wiped out in the savings and loan debacle. Poor neighborhoods have **50% fewer trees** than rich neighborhoods. Street trees increase community wealth.

2. Trees cool hot streets. This is a matter of life and death. In the era of increasing climate catastrophe, the air is so hot some places that birds are dropping dead right out of the sky. Thousands of people in the last few years have died from heat exhaustion. Heat causes more weather-related death in the U.S. than do hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, or extreme cold. It's getting hotter every year. Shade trees save lives. Here's a little science from the **EPA**: "Shaded surfaces, for example, may be 20–45°F (11–25°C) cooler than the peak temperatures of unshaded materials. Evapotranspiration, alone or in combination with shading, can help reduce peak summer temperatures by 2–9°F (1–5°C)." Cooling city streets, especially in poor neighborhoods, is a no-brainer.

3. Speaking of cool street trees, the urban forest turns down the temperature on the so-called urban heat island effect. Cool cities are safer cities. There's a measurable relationship between increasing temperature and **increasing crimes** of violence. Cooling cities helps reduce crime. When you turn up the heat, you turn up violent crimes, including assaults, rape, and murder. Want to reduce violent crime? Cool it. Trees fight crime by cooling streets.

4. Hiring young people to plant street trees sends money into the community. During the Depression, money paid by the CCC helped millions of families rise from poverty. To plant trees, workers first had to go to schools to learn some biology, some agronomy, and how to plant and tend the trees correctly. This practical schooling opened the doors to greater educational opportunities; the education provided cured their ignorance about nature. Planting street trees taught millions of people essential knowledge about how to protect and preserve the natural systems upon which prosperity and life itself depends.

5. Street trees require maintenance. This also generates income for city workers. The money in the **IRA for urban forests** will also help alleviate urban poverty by providing jobs.

6. Street trees **absorb pollution**. Millions of people suffer and some die from airborne pollutants. Trees take in toxic waste from automotive tailpipes and industrial pollution. As if by divine magic, trees turn our poisons into wood. Pollution is worst in poor neighborhoods. Trees fight disease. Thank you trees for making us healthier.

7. Patients recovering in hospital rooms that look out onto trees heal measurably faster than patients whose hospital rooms look out onto buildings. **Trees heal.**

8. Studies comparing identical housing projects, some with landscaping, some without, found lower crime rates in the housing projects with trees. Once again, **trees fight crime!**

9. Urban forests fight climate change in **many ways**. We already discussed how they cool streets (that helps), and how they reduce the urban heat island effect—that helps too—but

of course they also absorb carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses. These are win, win, wins in the fight to keep the climate from tipping into the truly catastrophic. The right tree in the right place fights climate change.

10. Trees have so many positive economic benefits that economists calculate that every \$1 spent establishing and maintaining the urban forest yields between **\$2 and \$5** in economic benefits. These studies probably underestimate the financial value of urban forests because they predate the time when climate change started supercharging extreme weather events. These ten reasons are just a start. All responsible public figures should dig even deeper, look at how street trees reduce the frequency of street repairs (hot streets degrade faster); or how street trees help water infiltration into the soil, thereby reducing flooding; or how street trees provide habitat for our dwindling wildlife populations. The benefit list is much longer than my little summary here. Street trees also make people feel good. Making people feel good is a good thing.

11. And, last but of critical importance, tree plantings in poor neighborhoods will help right a great injustice. As we covered above, poorer neighborhoods have 50% less greenery than rich neighborhoods. That's not fair. Most deaths from climate change come from heat exhaustion. Tree plantings in poor neighborhoods will help atone for previous injustices by saving lives. Failure to save those lives would deepen the injustice. It's not only a matter of **environmental justice** but of basic human decency that we plant trees in underserved neighborhoods, trees that will cool the streets and save lives.

So, Candidate Walker. Take it from an arborist whose grandfather built tree rows to tame the Dust Bowl, an arborist who is also an old veteran, and is worried sick about the world his daughter will inherit: trees are not the enemy. The \$1.5 billion in the IRA for urban forestry will improve the lives of many, many people. It will also be a step toward environmental justice. Given the monsters we face today, America can't afford politicians who want the government to fail, especially when that failure hurts lots of people. We need politicians who understand that one way we can address climate change and fight environmental racism is to plant and nurture trees. We will be growing shade and beauty as well as helping lift people from poverty, saving lives, and making Americans safer, richer, healthier, and better citizens.

Sincerely,

Joe Lamb, Arborist
Berkeley, CA



JOE LAMB

Joe Lamb, founder of the [Borneo Project](#), is a writer, activist, and arborist living in Berkeley, California. As a partner in tree care firm, Brende and Lamb, Joe has tended the urban forest for over 37 years.