

Think Like A Potato!



By Jim Skiera

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During the last meeting of the Sustainable Urban Forest Coalition held in Washington D.C. last May, Jim Schwab, Senior Research Associate for the American Planning Association, challenged the group with this statement, “We need to think like a potato!” Obviously, when you first hear someone make a comment like this you wonder how many martinis he had for lunch. Stick with me on this one, the simplicity of the statement is golden.

Jim then began to recite a list of the many ways a potato can be prepared and or used to meet the needs of a potential consumer. “Just think about it, there’s raw, baked, Julianne, French, freedom, cottage, steak, or shoestring fries; hash browns, potato soup, potato bread, potato salads, potato chips, mashed potatoes, dehydrated potatoes, and then there’s vodka, . . . well hopefully you get my point,” he finished. (I thought to myself again, *Must have been vodka martinis.* . . .) Jim continued his oration, “If trees are the answer, what’s the question?” (After this, I thought to myself: *Either planners have a great deal of time to think about these intellectual-type things—I guess that’s what ‘planners’ must do—or this was confirmation that Jim did have a few martinis at lunch.*)

Seeing he had grasped everyone’s attention by the puzzled looks on everyone’s face, he then followed with an explanation of the concept behind the odd directive. We need to think broadly about potential consumers so that we can craft multiple recipes, specific to their tastes, to encourage further use of our product. Suddenly, I experienced a point of clarity; we were thinking like potatoes for years and didn’t even realize it. There on the whiteboard in front of us, scrawled out in multiple colors of marker, was a list of questions that ‘trees could be used to answer.’ My mind wandered, I pictured myself standing behind a podium on the stage of the quiz show *Jeopardy*, Jim Schwab across the room looking back in an Alex Trebek-style gaze. *Quick, hit the buzzer*, I thought, trying to develop a response in the form of a question. *What is an effective and economical shading device that reduces the heat-island effect in urban centers?*

Because of this clarifying moment, the coalition decided to develop a series of briefing papers—or shall we now say recipes—that present trees as the answer for each of the topics listed under the Sustainable Urban Forest Coalitions economic, environmental, and social benefits statements. With the help of the diverse membership within the coalition, we will be crafting the messages to meet the needs of the specific audience of each coalition member organization. For example, planners are primarily interested in how trees improve the quality of life for people in the community as a component of a comprehensive

plan. They are not trained to consider the quality of life of the tree, so the message to them is that healthy trees and a healthy urban forest canopy improve the quality of life for the residents of the community.

To keep trees in the urban environment healthy they need care and consideration early on in the planning process. That is followed up with how to incorporate trees and urban forest needs into the comprehensive plan and other guiding policies so that they are not only planted in the right place and in the correct manner, but also cared for so that they actually do improve the quality of life and other benefits to our communities.

The briefing papers will be written to provide enough information to establish an understanding of how trees can be used to answer specific issues, such as storm water run-off mitigation, or the economic benefits and return on investment of greenspace. As we develop this menu of multiple recipes with the SUFC, ISA will also be working with other organizations to produce reference publications (as we did with American Forests and the American Planning Association to produce the Planning Advisory Service publication *Planning the Urban Forest: Ecology, Economy, and Community Development*). These publications are to be written in the language of a specific professional audience and will provide examples of how trees and urban forestry management have helped their peers solve critical issues for their profession.

A second example of this is the recent ISA book publication by James Urban, FASLA, *Up By Roots: Healthy Soils and Trees in the Built Environment*. This publication was written for landscape architects, civil engineers, and other aligned professionals to improve the development of specifications and planting details so that trees in urban areas not only survive but thrive. The American Society of Landscape Architects must be pleased with the content as Urban received an ASLA Award of Honor in the communication category within months of its release. Follow-up workshops, based on the book, has been held in multiple locations in the U.S. and Australia and is being well received by arborists and landscape architects, as well as park managers and civil engineers. ISA chapters are planning to conduct more—check the ISA website for information on upcoming locations and times.

In closing, I would encourage you all to do as Jim Schwab so eloquently states: Think like a potato! I would also encourage you to read both of the before mentioned publications as they will grant you insight into the worlds and languages of planners and landscape architects. Who knows, you may develop your own recipe like Jim Urban has, to help others make the world a better place, one tree at a time. **AN**