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The Outdoor Circle Wants to Put More on its Map

By Powell Berger | Photo by PF Bentley

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Ever wonder about that spectacular Indian banyan tree in the middle of Lahaina's Court Park? Or the Moreton Bay fig trees in Kilauea? And how about that 75-foot-tall kapok at the corner of Ke'eaumoku and Young streets in Honolulu?

Now there's a way to learn more about them, thanks to The Outdoor Circle's (TOC) virtual tree map.

The Hawai'i State Legislature passed the Exceptional Tree Act in 1975, setting standards for those trees considered too important to forget (or cut down) and including a tax exemption for those who have these trees on their private property. TOC's 2-year-old project maps the trees—approximately 1,200, mostly on O'ahu—and provides information about their trunk size and their height and condition. The virtual map tells us how to

find them, and its accompanying website offers tips on what to look for, and even how to qualify that big tree in the backyard for the list and the tax exemption.

“A lot of these really old trees are at the end of their natural lives and starting to die,” says Myles Ritchie, TOC’s program director. “We want to encourage people to keep the program going, get more exceptional trees on the list, and plant for the next generation.” Ritchie knows something about these trees: He and TOC’s interns personally inspect each one before it goes on the map, often traipsing through rain forests and working with private landowners to find them. “Sometimes it’s easy. We drive up and it’s right there in the front yard,” he says. “At other times, we’re hiking through remote areas with lava flows nearby while we look for a tree.”

The program’s supporters hope the state tax break—up to a \$3,000 exemption every three years to cover maintenance costs—will encourage homeowners to nominate trees on their property, helping to grow the list. Denby Fawcett and Bob Jones submitted their Chinese banyan tree for consideration in 2012. Fawcett laughs in recalling when they first saw the Diamond Head property 40 years ago. “It was at sunset, and this house wrapped around this extraordinary tree and Bob said, ‘We’re buying this house. I love this tree, this setting.’” As new homes pop up on the street, the tree’s “exceptional” designation now deflects neighborly disputes. “Neighbors ask about trimming the tree to improve their views, but by law, we can’t do anything to it,” Fawcett says.

If you have a candidate in your yard, don’t be surprised if Ritchie stops by. “It’s easy to nominate a tree,” he says, “So we sometimes help homeowners with the paperwork.” Each county’s arborist/Exceptional Trees committee fields nominations and visits trees when possible before selecting that year’s additions to the county list.

TOC has a long history with many of these trees, having planted more than 100,000 trees across the state since the group’s founding in 1912. At 26, Ritchie may be a sapling in tree years, but through this program, has become a veritable tree of wisdom. For him, it’s a badge of honor. “You connect with nature, and you get a sense of place,” he said. “You connect with your community.”

The Outdoor Circle’s website has program details along with the map, which is updated regularly. 1-808-593-0300; outdoorcircle.org.

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