



Gordon and Mary Wheeler with their butternut tree, possibly the largest such tree in the country.

Chester boasts the biggest butternut tree

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By JUDITH DUNCAN
Staff Writer

CHESTER - $C + H + (S/4) = 337$.

It's not one of Einstein's long-lost theories, but a formula that could just prove that the biggest butternut tree in the country might be right here in Chester, Connecticut.

It's the formula used by a sort of Guinness Book of big trees - the "National Register of Big Trees" - to define big treehood.

It's Circumference in inches (at about four feet from the ground), plus the Height in feet, plus one-fourth of the average Spread of the leaf canopy in feet, adding up to a point number which big tree enthusiasts use to compare trees all over the country.

The Chester tree came in at 337 points. But it's in a twig-and-twig race with another butternut in Eugene, Oregon, listed in the last edition of the National Register with 328 points. The Chester tree is still growing, and it's likely the other is too.

The Chester tree, estimated to be about 195 years old, is in the backyard of Gordon and Mary Wheeler's yellow farmhouse on Kings's Highway.

When measured on June 17 by Edward Richardson of Glastonbury, a practiced tree measurer who's measured over 200 trees in Connecticut, the tree was 19 feet, 10 inches around, 80 feet tall, with an average canopy spread of 76 feet.

"Butternut heaven," is what Richardson calls Chester. The town not only has this tree, which is anyway the largest butternut in the state and in

(Continued on Page 31)

(Continued from Page 1)

8-23-88

New England, but also the second largest butternut in the state. That tree is in Bruce Watrous's yard at 60 West Main Street.

In a 1973 measuring the trunk of the tree in the Wheelers' yard was 17 feet 5 inches.

In 1987 Glenn Dreyer, assistant director of the Connecticut Arboretum at Connecticut College, called Richardson up to ask him to measure the tree again. Dreyer heads the Notable Trees Committee which in 1984 set out to find the largest trees in the state in about 200 species.

Richardson measures the circumference with a tape. Then he steps back 100 feet - if possible - from the tree, sights the top through a device called a clinometer and reads off the height (if getting back 100 feet is impossible it takes some extra figuring to get the height). To measure the canopy, he runs the tape beneath the widest stretch of branches, then measures the width at right angles, and averages those two figures for the canopy spread. The spread is divided by four for the formula.

Richardson sent the measurements in to the National Forestry Association which makes up the National Register. He's not sure when he'll get a response, or when the next edition of the register comes out.

And, then there's the maple

The Wheelers' backyard also boasts a sugar maple which until recently was listed as the largest in Connecticut until another near the commuter parking lot in the neighborhood of the Norwich Sheraton in Norwich measured larger.

The Wheelers first became aware of that tree's claim to fame in 1969 when "we couldn't figure out what to do with the cub scouts one day so we had them measure our tree," Mary Wheeler said. It took five cub scouts and one scoutmaster to stretch around the tree. The maple is estimated at 246 years old.

The butternut tree is by itself on the edge of a brook, which may be why it has grown so large. "It has water all year long," Mary Wheeler said. Also, no nearby trees compete for light.

Richardson had no explanation why Chester should be home to two large butternuts, except that they're both in yards of fairly old homes and may have had some protection.

"It's something - you figure the maple was here when the guys walked off to the Revolution, and both were here when they went off the Civil War ... if trees could talk..." Mary Wheeler said.

Some parts of the fireplaces in the Wheelers' house date back to 1695. The chimney includes a compartment for smoking meat, and a downstairs fireplace features a removable brick which, Mary Wheeler says, could be used to let the cool air up from the cellar in summer - a sort of air conditioning.

The Wheelers' garage houses a mobile home "it's 4 years old and we've put 67,000 miles on it," Gordon Wheeler said. They visited every state except Hawaii and every province in Canada, including a trip to the polar bear migrations.

But they also enjoy their backyard. "During nutting season when we have picnics under the butternut tree, the squirrels become very irate, they chatter up in the tree, and they really let us know the trees don't belong to us," Mary Wheeler laughed.

The butternut is a native tree, Richardson said, and used to be very popular because the nuts are good and nutritious. The wood, he said, is known as white walnut. "It's softer than black walnut and used for fine paneling - if you can find trees large enough - they're not that common," he added.

The state has two other trees that may prove to be national champions, the sugar maple in Norwich, and a gray birch in East Windsor. A Washington hawthorn in the arboretum may be a co-winner.

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