

I'm quite certain that every child growing up in Nebraska eventually learns of the legacy of J. Sterling Morton. Morton was an early pioneer who moved to the Nebraska Territory from Detroit, Michigan, in 1854. Both he and his wife were nature lovers, and the home they established in Nebraska City, today called Arbor Lodge, was quickly planted with trees, shrubs and flowers. Morton was a journalist who advocated tree planting by individuals. He also encouraged civic organizations and groups to plant trees. On January 4, 1872, Morton first proposed to the Nebraska State Board of Agriculture, a tree-planting holiday to be called Arbor Day. Nebraska's governor, Robert W. Furnas, officially proclaimed the first Arbor Day on March 12, 1874.

In 1885, Arbor Day was designated a legal holiday in Nebraska, and by 1894, Morton's words had sparked the imagination of others throughout our nation —thus creating a national Arbor Day in every state. Today, the most common date for state observances is the last Friday in April. In many states, Arbor Day celebrations coincide with the best tree-planting weather - from January in the South to May in the far North.

The National Arbor Day Foundation ®, which incidentally was established in Nebraska by Nebraskans and is headquartered in Nebraska City, also evolved from J. Sterling Morton's efforts. Today this national organization, in cooperation with the USDA Forest Service and the National Association of State Foresters, sponsors a national program titled Tree City USA ®.

Last week, I had the opportunity to travel to Lincoln, Nebraska, with Patrick Haight of Minden, a board member of the Nebraska Community Forestry Council and chairman of the Minden Tree Board, to celebrate Tree City USA ®. Along with other recipients representing communities throughout the state, we gathered for the 2015 Nebraska Community Conference and for the Tree City USA® celebration. Well over one-hundred Nebraska communities were recognized as a Tree City USA® for 2014.

Tree City USA ® provides direction, technical assistance, public attention, and national recognition for urban and community forestry programs. To qualify a community must have a group of concerned volunteer citizens charged by ordinance to develop and administer a comprehensive tree management program. The tree management program must meet four standards.

1. Standard one is the establishment of a tree board. In a typical city, at least half of the trees are on public property. Someone needs to be legally responsible for the care of those trees. Each Tree City USA has a forester, city department or tree board designated by ordinance to be responsible for community tree care.
2. Standard two is a community tree care ordinance. The ordinance determines public tree care policies for planting, maintenance, and removals.

3. Standard three requires a Tree City USA to have within its budget at least \$2 per capita designated for public tree management. This includes addressing dead and hazardous trees, pruning, planting, watering and insect and disease control.
4. Standard four requires a Tree City USA® to have an official Arbor Day observance and proclamation.

One hundred and seventeen Nebraska communities were recognized and certified this year as a Tree City USA ®. Congratulations to the community of Kearney for achieving its 29th year of recognition, the community of Shelton for its 9th year of recognition and also to the City of Minden for its 25th year.

Arbor Day is a time for celebration. On Friday, April 24, 2015, I encourage all Nebraskans to celebrate Arbor Day by planting a tree. After all, this special holiday began in Nebraska nearly 141 years ago. Surely that in itself is something worth celebrating.