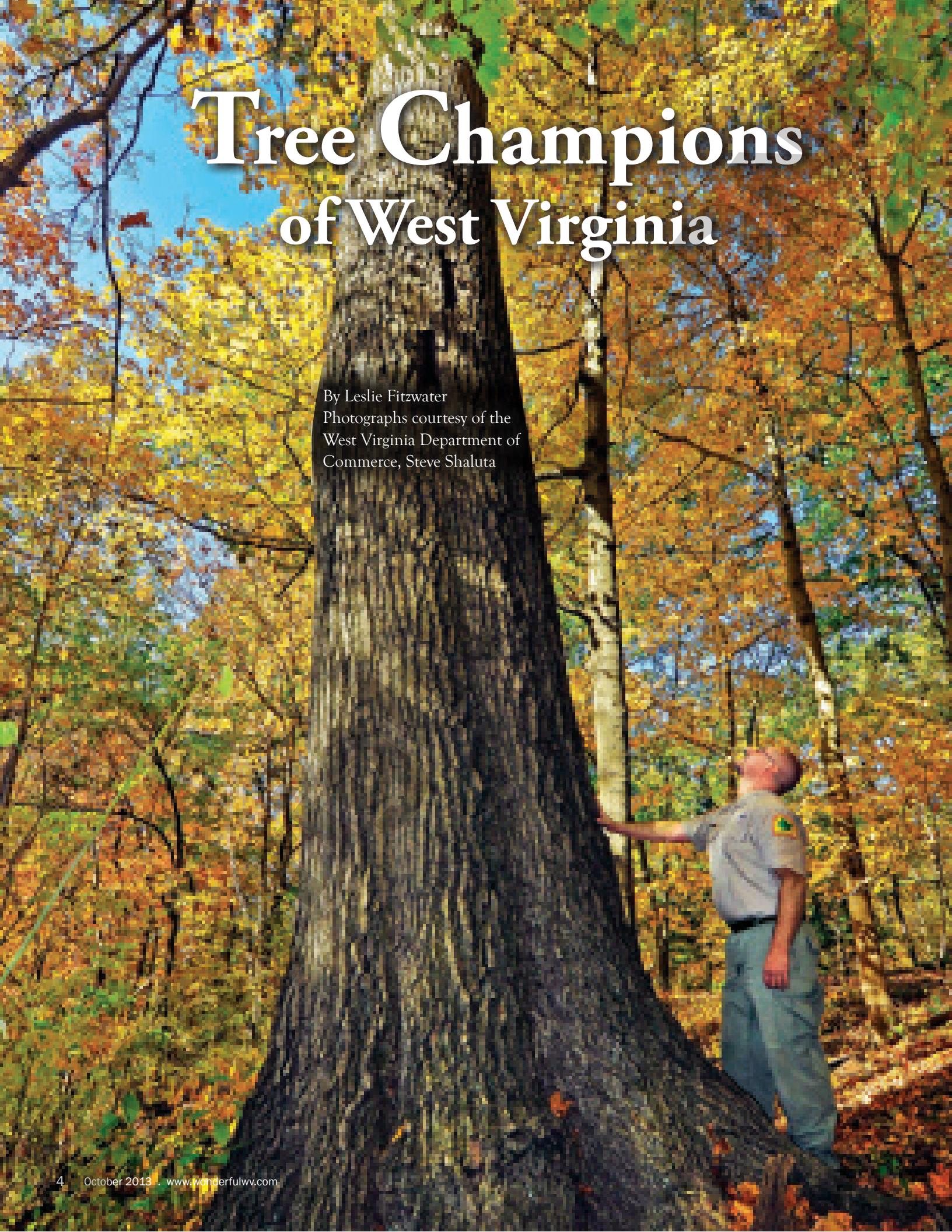


Tree Champions of West Virginia

A large, dark brown tree trunk dominates the center of the image, surrounded by vibrant autumn leaves in shades of yellow, orange, and red. A person wearing a light-colored shirt and jeans is seen from behind, hugging the tree trunk. The background is filled with more trees and foliage, creating a dense, colorful forest scene.

By Leslie Fitzwater
Photographs courtesy of the
West Virginia Department of
Commerce, Steve Shaluta

As part of West Virginia's centennial celebration in 1963, the Division of Forestry held a big tree contest. More than 240 nominations representing 37 species were submitted. Half a century later, as the state celebrates its sesquicentennial, the West Virginia Big Tree Register boasts 124 species, including three champions from the original 1963 list and three national champions.

Because trees grow in a variety of shapes and sizes, the fairest way to determine which ones make the Big Tree Register is to compare members of the same species against one another. Three measurements are taken and added together to calculate a tree's score: Circumference is measured in inches at breast height, or 4.5 feet from the base of the tree. Height is determined in feet. Crown spread, the distance in feet across the outermost leaves/twigs of the crown, is calculated by taking two measurements: one at the widest spread and a second at a 90-degree angle to the first measurement. The two crown-spread measurements are added together and divided in half.

Once the circumference, height, and crown spread are determined, foresters add the total circumference and height to one-fourth of the crown spread for an aggregate score. The tree with the highest score becomes the biggest tree of that species on record. For example, West Virginia's largest sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*), the state tree, grows in Jefferson County and measures up this way: 199 inches circumference + 108 feet height + 23 feet crown spread (1/4 of total crown spread) = 330 points.

Based on this scoring system, the largest tree on record in West Virginia is a sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*) that grows near Viola in Marshall County. This tree has a 311-inch circumference and a 128-foot crown spread, and it stands 117 feet tall. Its total score is 460 points. There are taller trees on the register, including a Nicholas County yellow poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), which, at 173 feet tall, is the tallest tree in the state. But none have a higher total score than the Marshall County sycamore. The smallest species on record in West Virginia is a white fringetree (*Chionanthus virginicus*) that grows near Glen Daniel in Raleigh County. It has a 12-inch circumference and a 10-foot crown spread, and it is 19 feet tall. Its total points equal 34.

Turner Sharp, a semiretired forester and chairman of the Parkersburg Tree Commission, began working with the Division of Forestry in 2009 to update the Big

► **Bob Hannah, Urban Forestry and Big Tree Program coordinator for the West Virginia Division of Forestry, examines West Virginia's second largest scarlet oak, located at West Virginia University's Core Arboretum.**

Tree Register. The register had been revised periodically since 1963, but after the Division of Forestry produced it in booklet form in 2001, a pile of new nominations was submitted.

Sharp and a group of state foresters concentrated on locating and remeasuring established champions, including the original centennial trees, and inspecting new nominations to calculate their scores. According to Sharp, approximately 25 percent of those listed on the register had either died or are presumed dead because they couldn't be located.

Of the original centennial trees, three are still standing and remain champions. The state champion American holly (*Ilex opaca*) grows in Orgas in Boone County and has a total point value of 158. It is 97 inches in circumference and 53 feet tall, and it has a 32-foot crown spread. Sadly, its history and age are unknown. The current owner, who has lived on the property since the early 1970s, knows only that it was planted generations ago by the farmer who had owned the land.

A sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) growing near Bickmore

This Virginia pine, which grows near Smithtown in Monongalia County, is a national champion.



in Clay County has a total score of 292. It has a 154-inch circumference and is 118 feet tall, and it has an average crown spread of 81.

A baldcypress (*Taxodium distichum*) in Weston in Lewis County is as old as, or older than, the state of West Virginia. Explains owner Constance Pierson, "According to the legend around Weston, Judge John Brannon, who built our house in 1853, brought a switch of the tree from Richmond and planted it here by the house."

Brannon served in both houses of the Virginia State Legislature before secession and later as a West Virginia circuit judge. Pierson and her husband, Robert, who have lived in the house since 1998, installed a plaque with the tree's statistics for passersby to read.

"Every year the school brings children to look at the tree and the teacher tells them all about it," Pierson adds. "Our tree even has babies around the town. People like our tree, and

West Virginia University is home to the state's largest horse chestnut.



whenever it has seed pods people come and ask for them. One baby is at least 10 feet high."

That "baby" has quite a way to go to catch up with its parent. The Weston baldcypress is 106 feet tall and has a circumference of 227 inches and an average crown spread of 76 feet, for a total score of 352 big tree points. The American holly, sweetgum, and baldcypress are the only three centennial trees that remain on the West Virginia Big Tree Register.

All 50 states and the District of Columbia maintain big tree listings, the highest scorers of which become national champions. The *National Register of Big Trees* is produced by American Forests, a national nonprofit conservation organization. The Spring 2013 online edition includes 777 native and naturalized champion trees. Among those are three West Virginia trees.

The national champion Virginia pine (*Pinus virginiana*) grows near Smithtown in Monongalia County. It is 65 feet tall and has a 125-inch circumference and a 63-foot crown spread. Its total score is 206 points. Harrison County is home to the national champion fanleaf hawthorn (*Crataegus flabellata*). This tree scored 103 points, with a 56-inch circumference, 38-foot height, and 37-foot crown spread. The national champion mountain maple (*Acer spicatum*) grows at Gaudineer Scenic Area in the Monongahela National Forest. With 83 points, it has a 31-inch circumference and an average crown spread of 32 feet, and it is 44 feet tall. Sharp discovered the mountain maple while trying to locate another big tree.

"When you come across a tree that's large for its species, you can check the national register to see how it stacks up, and that happened to stack up pretty good," Sharp recalls. "I was amazed because usually that species champion would be found in the Great Smoky Mountains. Their champion apparently died because they took it off the list."

Sharp says the competition among big tree hunters will no doubt lead to the discovery of an even bigger mountain maple. "I suppose somebody down there is going to go out and find another bigger one soon, when they find out someone took their champion away from them," he muses.

The Division of Forestry doesn't publish the addresses or GPS coordinates of big trees to protect the privacy of the landowners. There are, however, plenty of big trees people can visit in public areas. The national champion mountain maple grows on public land in the



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Monongahela National Forest. West Virginia University in Morgantown is home to two big trees: The state's largest horse chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) grows on the downtown campus, 100 feet east of Armstrong Hall. WVU's Core Arboretum is home to the state's second-largest scarlet oak (*Quercus coccinea*), which grows on the south side of the Strausbough Trail, 300 feet from the arboretum entrance.

The state's champion white pine (*Pinus strobus*) grows between Cabins #8 and #9 at Greenbrier State Forest. The champion fleshy hawthorn (*Crataegus succulenta*) grows in the parking lot of the Canyon Rim Center at Pipestem State Park, and U.S. National Parks Service property near Harpers Ferry is home to the champion Japanese chestnut (*Castanea crenata*).

Why is there such an interest in big trees? "People stop and look. It rings some kind of bell with them," Sharp says. "I've noticed that people mostly respond to big girth trees more than tall trees. When you combine the two, that's pretty impressive and people really respond to that."

The West Virginia Big Tree Register is available for review online at www.wvcommerce.org/BigTrees. A spreadsheet of state champions can be viewed by common name, scientific name, or county. Nominations are accepted through the website, which also has a photo gallery and a how-to guide for measuring trees.

Sharp encourages anyone who thinks they have found a champion tree to take measurements and compare them to those on the official big tree register. "Circumference and crown spread are easily measured with tape, but height has always been a bugaboo because it is easy to get that wrong," he says. "We ask people to give it their best shot, and if their measurements are close to those of a tree on the register, we'll verify it."

Sharp also asks people to let the Division of Forestry know if a registered big tree has fallen, adding, "After the derecho and the big snowstorm of 2012, I just wonder if they're all still there."

To see a list of national tree champions, visit American Forests' website at www.americanforests.org/our-programs/bigtree.

Leslie Fitzwater is a public information specialist with the West Virginia Department of Commerce. She is proud to be a lifelong resident of the Mountain State and says she can't imagine living anywhere else.

► Well known to locals, this magnificent baldcypress in Weston is older than the state of West Virginia.

