

September 23, 2011 9:56 pm

[Share](#) [Clip](#) [Reprints](#) [Print](#) [Email](#)

A movable forest

By Matthew Wilson

Transplanting trees has now become the instant landscape option of the very wealthy



Matthew Wilson at Majestic Trees, a nursery that makes 78 per cent of its sales to private clients

A few years ago, a garden design colleague of mine recounted a site visit to a garden in upstate New York where he was pitching a proposal. The client took him to the boundary of the property where his neighbour had purchased and planted, at great expense and with significant logistical complexity, some seriously big – 15m-tall plus – trees. They were the talk of the neighbourhood, not least as the convoy of heavy wagons required to ship the trees in had literally stopped traffic. “Whatever else you do,” said the client, “make sure my trees are bigger.”

There can be no doubting the sense of satisfaction that comes from growing a plant from seed; the gradual excitement as the cotyledons appear, slowly developing from weak and delicate shoots into ever stronger stems and eventual maturity. But if instant gratification is required, then planting big,

Editor's Choice

HOT PROPERTY



High-tech houses

INTERIORS



Bedrooms

Most popular in Life & Arts

1. They're watching. And they can bring you down
2. Billion dollar brains
3. Birth of the global mind
4. The Wellcome at 75
5. It's TV, but not as we knew it

and in particular planting big trees, is the only sure way to get it.

More

ON THIS STORY

[Untroubled waters](#)

[Not just a pretty view](#)

[Curves in all the right places](#)

[More than capable](#)

[Inspired, naturally](#)

There's nothing new in this arboreal impatience. The landscaper [Lancelot "Capability" Brown](#) planted trees by the several thousand, and although the sheer numbers involved ensured they were predominantly comprised of small two- and three-year-old plants, he was not above planting a copse or avenue of larger specimens to please his clients.

Arborist William Barron went further in his enthusiasm, inventing the first of a number of horse-drawn tree transplanting machines in 1831 and eventually going on to supervise the moving of trees of up to 25m in height at places of note such as Elvaston Castle in Derbyshire and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in London.

Transportation has always been and remains the biggest cost and the greatest technical challenge associated with large plants. Ultimately, big trees are only really worth something if you can move them, and often the bulk of that value is absorbed by the haulage and logistical costs.

The weight isn't just in the bark, stem and sinew of the plant, but in the soil and root too, and the taller the plant the bigger the root ball required to improve the chances of successful transplantation. We recently moved a 5m-tall olive tree into a client's conservatory in London, and even such a modest tree required a 60-tonne crane to heft it into place. During the laying out of the gardens at Hever Castle in Kent around the turn of the 20th century, John Jacob Astor got around the logistical headaches of importing mature trees 20 miles or so from the Ashdown forest by building an extension to the local railway line. A three mile extension, complete with station.

Typically today a large tree will require an articulated low loader to move it from nursery to destination, and then a crane or telescopic forklift to manoeuvre it on site, or in more spacious sites a tree spade – a diesel-powered machine with a circle of huge, blade-like spades that insert in sequence into the soil around the tree, lift it clear of the ground, and then track to another location to replant the tree in a prepared pit. If the tree's destination is a confined space or city location then it may be that road closures and police support are required.

Impatience isn't the only factor behind the desire to plant big; sometimes the reasons are as much to do with the emotional response to the loss of a tree, or the departure of a historically significant specimen. US-based tree transplanting specialists Environmental Design move monster trees, some weighing over 250,000 kilos and taller than a five-storey building. At Pebble Beach golf course in California the death of a historic Monterey Pine that had guarded the 18th green for almost a century completely changed the way the

Multimedia

[Video](#)

[Blogs](#)

[Podcasts](#)

[Interactive graphics](#)

[Audio slideshows](#)

Tools

[Portfolio](#)

[FT Lexicon](#)

[FT clippings](#)

[Currency converter](#)

[MBA rankings](#)

[Today's newspaper](#)

[FT press cuttings](#)

[FT ePaper](#)

Updates

[Alerts Hub](#)

[Daily briefings](#)

[FT on your mobile](#)

[Share prices on your phone](#)

[Twitter feeds](#)

 [RSS feeds](#)

Quick links

[Mergermarket](#)

[How to spend it](#)

[SchemeXpert.com](#)

[Social Media hub](#)

[The Banker](#)

[fDi Intelligence](#)

[Professional Wealth Management](#)

[This is Africa](#)

[Investors Chronicle](#)

Services

[Subscriptions](#)

[Corporate subscriptions](#)

[Syndication](#)

[Conferences](#)

[Annual reports](#)

[Jobs](#)

[Non-Executive Directors' Club](#)

[Businesses for sale](#)

[Contracts & tenders](#)

[Analyst research](#)

[Company announcements](#)

hole played, and not for the better. A 200-year-old Monterey Cypress was moved from one side of the course to another to replace the lost pine, in a six-month-long project involving steel gantries that slowly jacked the tree out of the ground and lowered it back again, a 40-wheel low loader and a team of dozens.

The humanising of built environments also adds weight to the case in favour. During the development of Canary Wharf in London from post-industrial wasteland to gleaming financial hub, mature planting on a scale previously unseen in the UK was undertaken by Willerby Landscapes, with 500 trees as old as 50 years shipped from Germany and Italy to the UK. Many of these arrived in the dead of night to minimise disruption. Willerby are among the main contractors at the [London 2012 Olympic site](#) where yet more big tree planting is taking place, including the largest wet woodland re-creation scheme ever undertaken in Britain. The advantage of bringing in large trees to such big, intimidating spaces is that it provides us with something on a scale we recognise and feel comfortable with, and does so immediately.

But big trees require a great deal of preparation prior to being moved. The root ball is subjected to regular under-cutting to encourage lots of fine fibrous roots at the expense of arm-thick anchoring roots. Even trees that have been specifically grown to be sold and moved as large specimens will suffer checking of growth in root and shoot that can be best described as a form of shock. How quickly the plant gets over this, if at all, can rest on several factors.

Soil preparation prior to planting is essential, but it isn't as simple as tossing in a few bags of compost. In some respects transplanting a big tree is like an organ transplant – the closer the match between soil in the root ball and the prepared ground the better.

There are also subtle climatic factors that can influence how successfully a large tree transplants. If the specimen has spent 25 years cossetted in a sheltered valley, how well will it take to being blasted by exposure on a hilltop, or blown by the wind tunnel conditions of many cityscapes?

In tropical and sub-tropical climates this can be less of a problem, in part because trees tend to grow much faster than in temperate climates, and also because growing conditions are usually warmer and wetter for longer periods, making the shock of transplantation less intense. But there can be other complications caused by wet, warm weather, such as root rots.

Irrigation is usually essential, but how much and how regularly to water is a science that is easy to get wrong. Water too much before the tiny root hairs have recovered enough to take up the water and there is a risk of drowning the tree. Water too little and the plant will rapidly defoliate and, if left untended, die. Really big trees may also need a regime of canopy and/or root pruning for several seasons before they have fully established and settled into a new environment.

So is the additional cost, machinery, planning and potential disruption worthwhile? In terms of instant impact, undoubtedly – a 20- or 25-year-old tree provides immediate maturity to the landscape. And it seems that the desire to plant big has been only moderately dampened by the global economic crisis. Steve McCurdy, managing director of Majestic Trees in Hertfordshire, UK, saw a downturn in 2008/09 but a significant recovery since then, with 78 per cent of sales from the nursery going to private clients or designers working

on their behalf.

Within 20 years, maybe even less, a sapling 1m tall at planting will almost always outstrip the growth of a 25-year-old transplanted tree, having as it does all the advantages of being able to acclimatise, gradually develop its roots and grow slowly through lean years and more rapidly in good ones.

But providing the right tree species is acquired, appropriate transplanting expertise is applied, the correct preparation undertaken and skilled aftercare put in place then the investment required to buy and care for big trees will be repaid with maturity that, if you simply cannot wait, can only be bought.

Matthew Wilson is a garden writer and broadcaster and the managing director of Clifton Nurseries, London, www.clifton.co.uk

The first British Tree Week, organised by Bosch Lawn and Garden, begins on October 3, www.BritishTreeWeek.co.uk

.....

How deep you'll need to dig

A 50-year-old tree, which is typically the oldest commercially available tree to buy from a nursery (mature trees of larger sizes can be moved from one location to another) can weigh about eight tonnes and have a girth of 1.4m or more. At that age and weight the only way to manoeuvre it is with a 140-tonne crane, which will take two days to rig, two days to de-rig and require three articulated lorries as support vehicles.

Irrigation for big trees is critical during the establishment phase – around 150–200 gallons per day, every day, for the first growing season, which could be as much as 35,000 gallons in the first year.

Trees are generally sold according to standardised sizing based on the girth of the tree, starting at light standard (6-8cm) up to semi-mature (18-20cm plus). A heavy standard tree (one of the most popular sizes of larger trees), 12-14cm and usually around 2.5m–3m tall, can cost £150-£800 depending on species, with delivery and planting costs on top.

For semi-mature trees expect to pay a lot more: £6,000-£10,000 for a 20-year-old oak, £8,000-£12,000 for a mature olive tree. Transportation and planting costs also increase significantly as the logistical complexities deepen. If you want something much bigger – a 50-year-old red oak, for example – then total costs are likely to exceed £20,000.

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2011. You may share using our article tools. Please don't cut articles from FT.com and redistribute by email or post to the web.

[Share](#) [Clip](#) [Reprints](#) [Print](#) [Email](#)