

This Star Search Hunts for Trees Worthy of Memorial

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MILLSTONE TOWNSHIP, N.J., Nov. 17 — From the gently inclined open field at Back Bone Hill and Stillhouse Roads, ground zero is 38 miles away. Thirty-eight miles and three years.

This is the field where 380 swamp white oaks and 57 sweetgums — to be shipped in from nearby states — will be kept and cultivated before making one more journey in 2009, to the World Trade Center memorial in Lower Manhattan.



Sweetgum trees, like these, and white oaks will be chosen for the World Trade Center site and moved for cultivation until they are planted in 2009.

Brian Branch Price for The New York Times

The search for these trees has begun in earnest at nurseries in New Jersey and in roadside fields in Maryland. (Five sweetgums were ceremonially tagged last year on Long Island.) On Nov. 9, the World Trade Center Memorial Foundation selected Environmental Design of Tomball, Tex., to find, choose, transport, replant and care for the trees, working with the landscape architects at Peter Walker and Partners of Berkeley, Calif.

These trees will essentially be the architecture of the memorial, forming allees and bowers around the two great voids where the twin towers stood. They will be a canopy for the memorial and a buffer from the skyscrapers all around. They will also be the memorial's stained-glass ceiling, turning from wintry silver to chartreuse in springtime, then to emerald at the height of summer.

And in early autumn, if ideal conditions are met, the circle of sweetgums around the memorial glade will break away in color from the neighboring oaks. Around mid-September as the oaks turn brown, the sweetgums' star-shaped leaves will turn yellow, orange and red.

Peter Walker, the landscape architect, imagines this as a setting for the annual reading of the names of the dead on Sept. 11. "It seemed very appropriate that something synonymous with early fall was going on," he said.

The tree scouts will be looking for straight trunks and branches that can be pruned to create a uniform canopy. They will keep an eye out for trees less than 20 feet high, with trunks about four or five inches in diameter. As a contingency against death and damage, they will identify about 10 percent more trees than are needed at the memorial.



Peter Walker, a landscape architect, at a nursery.

Brian Branch Price for The New York Times

Several potential sources have been identified: Halka Nurseries of Englishtown, N.J., which also owns the 12-acre field in Monmouth County where the trees are to be kept; High Ridge Farms of Imlaystown, N.J.; and some sweetgum stands along state highways in Maryland. Other trees may come from Pennsylvania.

The chosen trees will be dug up next spring by mechanical spades, placed in large boxes and trucked to the field in Millstone, where they will be kept boxed until 2009. Climatically, the area is comparable to Lower Manhattan.

“The cold events and wind events that you’d get there are not far from what you’d get here,” said Tom Cox, the owner of Environmental Design, during a visit to the New Jersey nurseries on Friday.

Because the contract with Environmental Design has not been signed, Joseph C. Daniels, the president of the memorial foundation, would not divulge its value aside from saying that it was less than \$10 million. The trees themselves are almost the least of it, costing only a few hundred dollars each.

“The real care that’s required is where the hard work and the cost come in,” Mr. Daniels said.



Joseph C. Daniels of the memorial foundation at what is to be the trees’ temporary home.

Brian Branch Price for The New York Times

As an example, Douglas Ross Findlay of Peter Walker and Partners described the planting and paving system planned for the memorial plaza, which is actually the rooftop of an enormous underground structure.

In most plazas, the pavement bears down on the pits in which the trees are planted, resulting in soil so compacted that roots cannot grow adequately.

At the memorial, the pavement will be suspended over the planting troughs like a deck set on structural legs. That will allow the soil to stay loose and permit the roots to extend themselves.

Conceivably, the oaks and sweetgums could live a century or more, said Paul F. Cowie, an arborist working on the project.

And that is the idea of the living memorial, Mr. Findlay said. “They’re sacred trees,” he said. “They need to thrive and grow and become old.”