

Meeting Trees in City Hall Park



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Photos and text by Gail Karlsson

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Front cover: American Elm in the northeast section of City Hall Park

Back cover: Horse Chestnut on the walkway north of City Hall

When I Am Among the Trees

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness,
I would almost say they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows through their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."

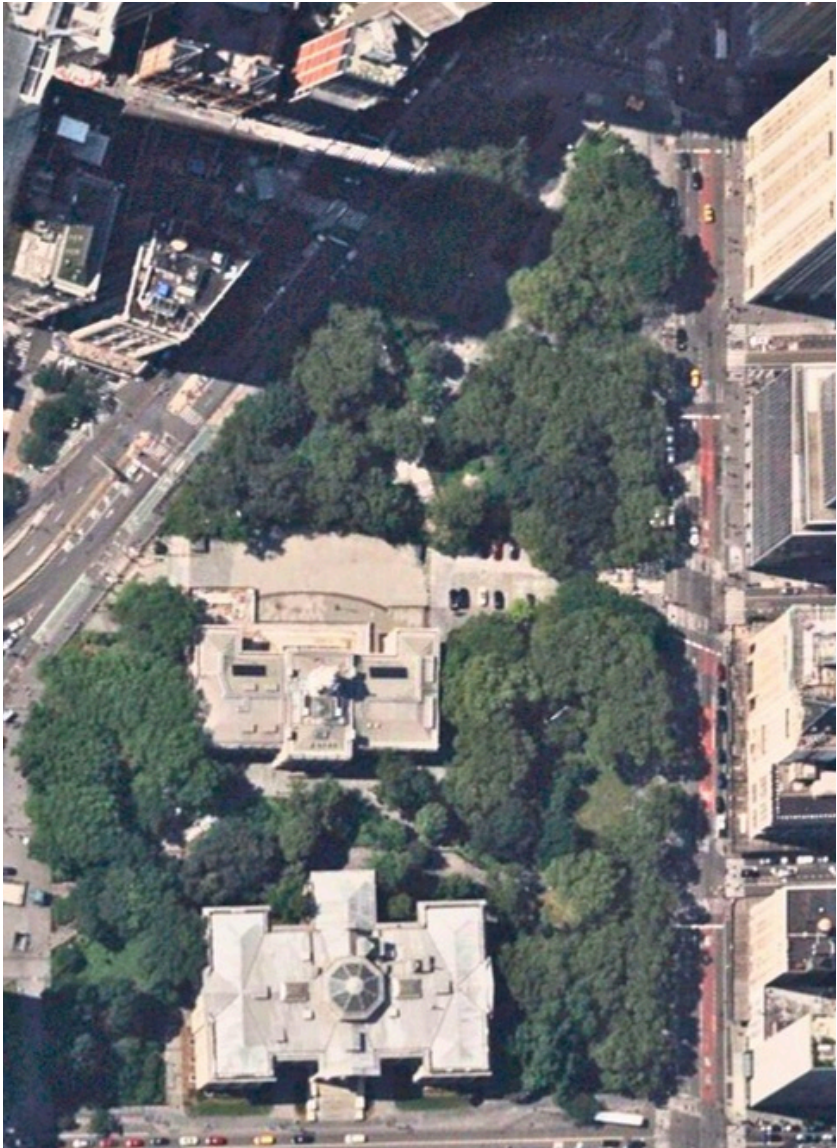
Mary Oliver



A misty May morning with fallen cherry blossoms on the lawn under London Plane trees



An Eastern Redbud tree blooming in April, with the Woolworth building in the background



Satellite view of City Hall Park looking south, with City Hall in the center and the Tweed building at the bottom

Introduction

You can meet some interesting characters in the park, especially if you look closely at the trees. However, I only recently started doing that.

Even though we have had an apartment next to City Hall Park for over forty years, I rarely paid much attention to particular trees. I was mostly busy with work and children.

I occasionally noticed the trees as I walked across the park to the subway – like in May when there was a sudden burst of pink flowers, or in October when the ginkgos dropped their leaves.

When access to the park was less restricted, we sometimes rode bikes near the steps to City Hall. Or planted tulips and raked leaves with the Friends of City Hall Park group, led by Skip Blumberg who lives downstairs in my building.



Then last summer, Skip told me he wanted to plan a celebration for April 2025 focused on the trees in City Hall Park. Since I had developed a new calling as a nature writer and photographer, this sounded like a great opportunity to explore nature in the park right next door.

I mostly see one type of tree from my window – the large London Plane trees at the northern edge along Broadway. How hard could it be, I thought, to identify the different types of trees in this little park, which is only a few blocks long.



Well, actually it was pretty hard.

I focused on the larger trees, and some were easy even for a non-expert to identify. But there are some imported ornamental trees that are hard to be sure about. And there was no easy source of accurate information. I bought tree books, tried using apps, and looked at the NYC Trees map online, but still in some cases had to ask for an onsite expert opinion.

When I was trying to identify the trees, I looked at their leaves, needles, cones or flowers, fruits or nuts. Often I stood in front of one tree for a long time, circling around, searching for clues in its branches, or on the ground.



Sometimes I spoke to the trees, asking for information or admiring their beauty. I touched their bark and caressed their leaves. It seemed like I could feel their energy.

You may scoff, but some of them became special friends, and I was eager to sit and visit with them when I went out to the park – it became a summer of love.

Trees from around the world have been planted in the park, and their lives are in many ways controlled by people. Yet even though they may have little in common, they still form a community, connected with each other – and with us too, as neighbors.





American Elm

When I was getting familiar with the different trees, one particular elm tree seemed to have a sassy face on it. Then I started seeing expressive looks on many of the other trees. Wow, I thought, they're looking back at me. How do they feel about me, I wondered. About us. About their lives in New York City.



Silver Linden



Cherry

Some old-timers must have seen successions of Mayors, City Council members and government officials, plus thousands of public events – demonstrations and protests, celebrations and parades. Witness trees.

It's common now to reference the ways trees communicate with each other, through underground networks of fungi and airborne chemical signals. Walking among the trees is also being touted as good for our immune systems. All those airborne chemicals, as well as the cooling, calming shade.

However, more important, I think, is the fact that trees are able to use the magic of photosynthesis to create energy and matter from light, supporting much of the life now existing on earth, and producing oxygen for us to breathe.

I invite you to go into the park and introduce yourself to a tree, any tree, and get to know it better. Maybe say thanks.

Meanwhile, there are a number of other types of creatures living in the park, or maybe just visiting in there for a while. Many different birds use the trees in their own special ways – including Red-tailed Hawks.



And of course there are squirrels. Plus all sorts of bees and butterflies, and other wild things you can meet and greet – right here in lower Manhattan.

Gail Karlsson

Beeches



European Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*)

The European Beech at the northeast edge of City Hall Park is slim, muscular and silvery gray – smaller and rougher looking than an American Beech.



A 'weeping' variety of European Beech has been cultivated from one original tree in an English park that grew unusually, with branches hanging down to the ground. There is one at the southeast end of the park, but you have to go around to the back on the Park Row side to see its trunk.

Buckeyes

The small buckeye trees in the middle of the park south of City Hall are related to horse chestnuts, with similar multi-sectional leaves in the shape of a hand, but they are native to the U.S. and horse chestnuts are European. They get their name from their seeds, which are dark brown with a light spot and maybe look like a deer's eye. They are full of toxic compounds and seem to have a teenage in-your-face type of aggressiveness. The hummingbirds like their flowers though.



Bottlebrush Buckeyes

(Aesculus parviflora) have big pointy flowers which jut out in a menacing way as you walk by, like an alien reaching for humans to probe.



Red Buckeyes (*Aesculus pavia*) have sets of small tubular flowers like firecrackers.

Catalpa

The **Northern Catalpa** tree (*Catalpa speciosa*) on the west side of City Hall, a bit north of the driveway, is not very large or showy but is charming because of its big, soft, heart-shaped leaves. In the fall it produces long seed pods.



In April, a Palm Warbler searched under the tree for insects as it headed north towards its breeding grounds.

Cedars

The one **Cedar of Lebanon** (*Cedrus libani*) in the park seems lonely standing on the busy corner of Broadway and Chambers Street. It is a very old type of evergreen tree from the Mediterranean, with short, spiral needles. These trees were used for thousands of years to build ships and houses.

The large female cones, which hold the seeds, have a barrel shape and sit up on top of the branches.



The small male cones higher up produce pollen, which is carried by the wind to fertilize the seeds below.



A migrating Black-throated Blue Warbler looked for bugs in the bark.



Deodar Cedars (*Cedrus deodara*) come from the Himalayas. In Sanskrit, ‘deva daru’ means ‘god tree’ or ‘tree of the gods’. Their wood has been used to build Hindu temples. They are widely appreciated in gardens for their ‘weeping’ evergreen foliage. There are seven of them in City Hall Park, six at the south end.



A migrating Bay-breasted Warbler stopped to look for insects on a Deodar Cedar branch.

Cherries

Kwanzan Cherry trees (*Prunus serrulata*) are cultivated hybrids originally from Japan. They are prized for their large pink flowers, but don't have edible fruit. In the winter they produce small flower buds that blossom dramatically in the spring before the leaves come out. You can see them on the west side of City Hall and at the south end.



Common Grackle



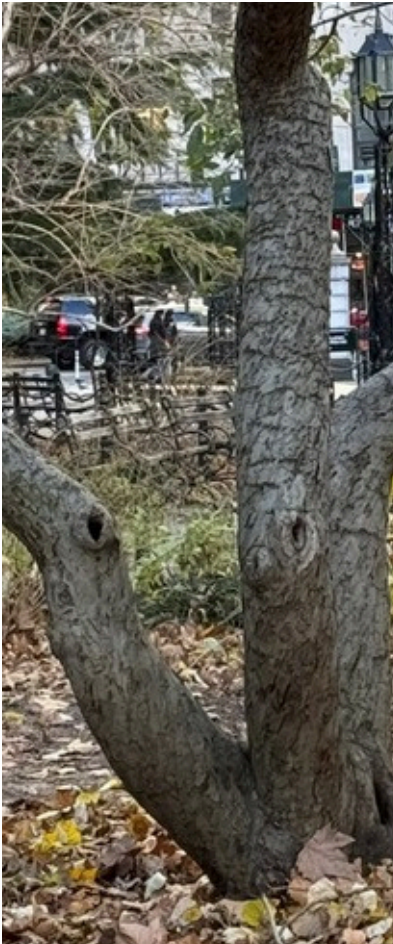
There is one delicate **Higan Weeping Cherry** (*Prunus subhirtella* 'Pendula') at the northwest side of the Tweed building. It is an ornamental cultivar that is grafted onto a different type of cherry tree as a base.

Crabapples



Cultivated Crabapple trees (*Malus spp.*) south of City Hall offer bright flowers and then small fruits, to the delight of people as well as birds, bees and other wildlife.

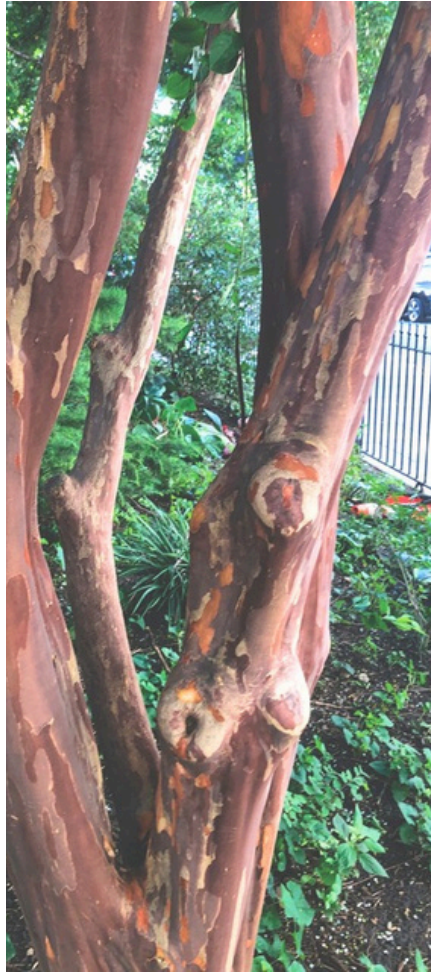
Resident American Robins and Gray Catbirds enjoy eating the tiny crabapples.



And a migrating Hermit Thrush came by too.

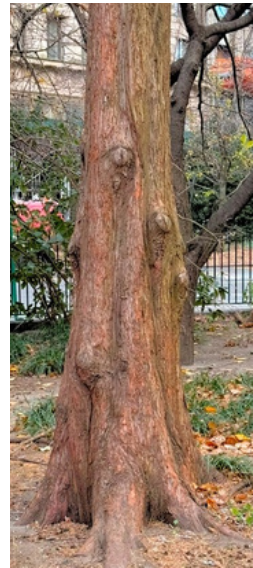
Crape Myrtles

These trees are native to Asia (*Lagerstroemia chinensis*). Their bark flakes off and creates multicolored patterns on their trunks. Their flowers come in many different shades too, and are often grown in southern U.S. states.



The tree with white flowers is hidden away on the northwest edge of the park. There are other small ones with purple flowers along Park Row by the entrance to City Hall.

Dawn Redwoods



There are two Dawn Redwoods (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) at the south end of the park. This is the shortest type of redwood. This tree is famous for having its leaf found by a paleobotanist in 1941 inside a 150 million year old fossil. Then later a grove of live ones was found in China. Their seeds are now being planted around the world, to keep them from going extinct. Even though they are conifers, they drop their leaves in winter, and their bark peels off in strips, giving them a ghoulish look.

Dogwoods

Kousa Dogwoods (*Cornus kousa*) are from Asia but have become naturalized in New York State. There are several in the park, and the larger ones have shaggy peeling bark. They flower in late May, and their fruits are tasty treats for birds.



A resident European Starling sampled the red fruit.

Flowering Dogwoods (*Cornus florida*) are small trees that are native to the eastern U.S. They bloom brightly in early spring before their leaves come out. You can see one to the south of City Hall.



Elms

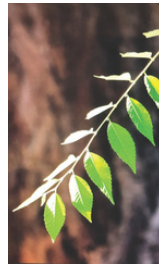
American Elms (*Ulmus americana*) dominate the northeast section of the park next to the Tweed building and along Park Row by City Hall. They tend to grow tall and relatively straight with symmetrical branches reaching up.



A migratory Black-and-white Warbler looked for bugs in the bark.



There are also **Siberian Elms** (*Ulmus pumila*) in the park, in the northeast area, and south of City Hall near Park Row. Their branches are sprawling and irregular and they have smaller, pointier leaves. This one makes me think of a ‘hanging’ tree, especially since there is a statue of Nathan Hale nearby, just south of City Hall. He was hung in 1776 by the British during the American revolution. His famous last words were reported to be: “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”



Migratory
Northern
Parula

Ginkgos

Ginkgo trees (*Ginkgo biloba*) have been around for about 250 million years, since the time of the dinosaurs. We know about this because of fossil impressions of their distinctive fan-shaped leaves. After the Ice Age, a few survived in China, and then later people planted them around the world. You can see them in the northern part of the park near the Tweed building. In the fall, their yellow leaves seem magical. However their fruits are very stinky.



Fruit and fan-shaped leaves

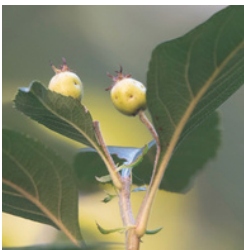


Migratory Northern Flicker woodpeckers probe for bugs.



Hawthorn

There is a **Cockspur Hawthorn** (*Crataegus crus-galli*) along the path crossing the park just north of City Hall. It is native to this area, and has flowers and fruit that are similar to the crabapples. But if you look closely you can see it has large thorns.



Hollies



American Holly (*Ilex opaca*) is a large evergreen tree that can grow up to 50 feet tall. The leaves are dark green matte (not glossy) and have spiny teeth along the edges. They have bright red berries that last from late fall into the middle of the winter, feeding resident catbirds and mockingbirds. There are two of them on the path along the north side of City Hall and one at the southeast end of the park.

The **English or European Holly** (*Ilex aquafolium*) in the northwest area of the park by the Tweed building is more like a shrub. It is a variegated type with white on the edges of its shiny, spiny leaves.



Close by, you can find a small **Chinese Holly** (*Ilex cornuta*). Its Latin name means 'horned'. Their leaves only have a few spines sticking out and a curved front so you might think their thorns look like horns.



Eastern Towhees arrive in New York in the spring for breeding season.

Horse Chestnuts

There are two impressive Horse Chestnut trees (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) on the north side of City Hall. They are native to Europe but many have been planted as ornamental trees around the world.

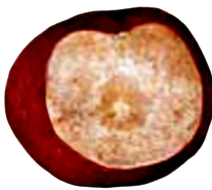




Horse Chestnuts have palmate leaves that grow in sets of five like hands.

The flowers stand up from the branches in tall spikes.

Unlike the native chestnuts, these nuts are bitter and toxic. Squirrels may collect them but probably don't actually eat them. Nor do people or horses, though extracts from the tree have been found to have some medical benefits. Horses, however, do have brown callouses on their legs that people call 'chestnuts'.



My neighbor told me that in England the nuts inside the spiky seed pods are called 'conkers' and are used in a popular game she played as a child.



Lindens

There are a couple of **Littleleaf Lindens** (*Tilia cordata*) along the Park Row side of the park. They are native to Europe, and their gray bark is marked by furrows and ridges that give them very distinctive, maybe cranky, expressions. Above their faces, their trunks split into multiple branches reaching upward in a tight group.



The **Silver Linden** (*Tilia tomentosa*) on the southwest edge of the park is native to southeastern Europe and Asia. Its leaves are larger and have hairs on their undersides.





London Planes



London Plane trees have been planted in many New York City parks, and also along the streets. They are tolerant of compacted soil conditions and their mottled, peeling skin allows them to slough off toxins in the air. Their leaves are similar to maples, but with fewer lobes and less color in the fall. They have been cultivated through cross-breeding of American Sycamore and Oriental Plane trees.

The sturdy branches of the London Plane trees provide perches for many of the local birds using the park.



American Crow



European Starling



Red-tailed Hawk



Blue Jay



Mourning Dove

Magnolias

Though magnolias are usually associated with the southern U.S., there are several small ones scattered around the park. They are hybrids of two different types of trees originally from Japan. They are called **Saucer Magnolias** because of the shape of their flowers. They have large blooms (up to ten inches across) which are most dramatic when they appear in early spring before the leaves come out.





Northern Cardinal
female



White-throated Sparrow

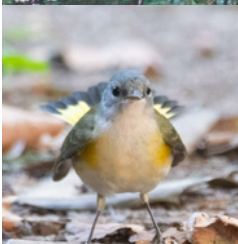
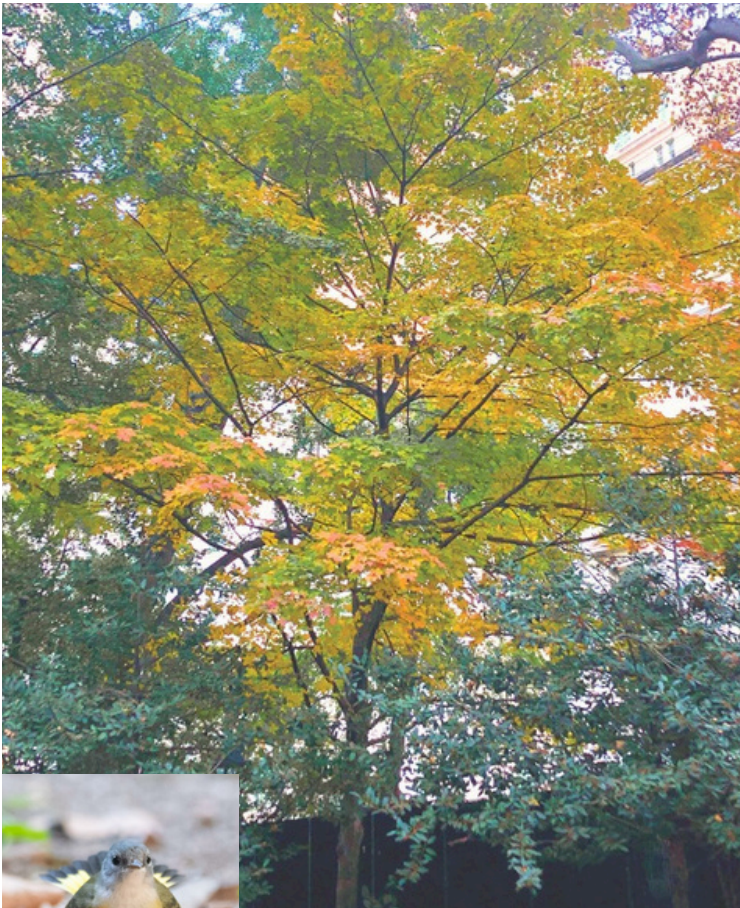


Gray Squirrel climbing a magnolia tree trunk

Maples



Sugar Maples (*Acer saccharum*) are native to the eastern U.S. and Canada. There is one in the northwest section of the park near the edge of the Tweed building. It is overshadowed by a ginkgo and other nearby trees, but becomes noticeable in the fall when its leaves turn yellow, then orange.



Female American Redstart foraging on the ground



Further down, in the southwest part of the park, I found another unfamiliar type of maple. It is an **Amur Maple** (*Acer ginnala*), native to northern Asia. Its leaves are smaller and pointier than the sugar maple but still three-lobed.



Oaks

Red Oak (*Quercus rubra*)

There is just one, on the west side of the park. It is south of the police booth, behind the security fence.



Pin Oak (*Quercus palustris*)

Next to the Red Oak, behind it to the east, there is one Pin Oak, with thinner leaves. Both are native trees.



Photo: Red Oak, left, Pin Oak, right. London Plane in center behind them.

To the east along Park Row south of City Hall you will find two more solitary oaks.

One is a **Burr Oak** (*Quercus macrocarpa*) donated to New York City as a gift from Canada. It is common in both the U.S. midwest and the Canadian plains.



The other is a **Willow Oak** (*Quercus phellos*), which has leaves that don't look at all like oak leaves. It is native to south-central and eastern U.S. Beyond it you can see the statue of Revolutionary War hero Nathan Hale.



Pines

There is an **Eastern White Pine** (*Pinus strobus*) near the southwest corner of the park along Broadway. Native to North America, it was a symbol of the Haudenosaunee Confederation of Nations – a Tree of Peace. Then later, in colonial times, the trees with tall straight trunks were taken as masts for ships in the British Navy.



Near the fountain in the southern part of the park there is another pine tree. This one is not native, and was identified by a NYC Parks forester as a **Japanese White Pine** (*Pinus parviflora*).



Plum

There is one plum tree (*Prunus domestica*) next to the statue of newspaper editor Horace Greeley in the northeast section of the park.

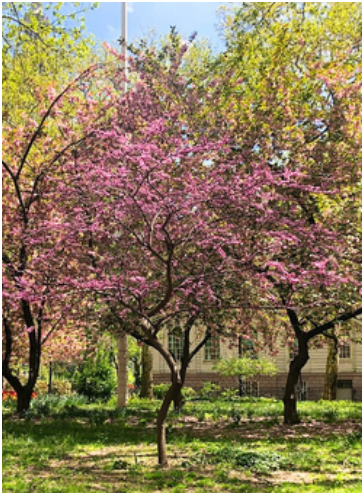


Female Common Yellowthroat,
a migratory warbler

Redbuds



The **Eastern Redbud** trees (*Cercis canadensis*) on the west side of City Hall burst spectacularly into bloom in early spring, with bright pink flowers emerging all along their bare branches. They are popular trees native to eastern North America. They have large heart-shaped leaves and long pea-like seed pods. Even without flowers you can identify them easily because their trunks have a distinctive twist.



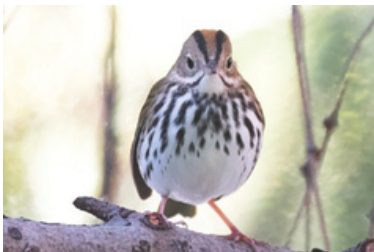
Snowbells

At the very southeast tip of the park I noticed an interesting tree with little whitish balls hanging on it. It turned out to be a **Japanese Snowbell** tree (*Styrax japonicus*). In the fall, the snowbells dried up and I could see the little seeds inside.



Spruces

There are two **Norway Spruces** (*Picea abies*) in the northwest section of the park. I am grateful to them for providing some green branches in that area during the winter months when the leaves are gone on the deciduous trees. There are also two other spruces in the south by the fountain.



Ovenbirds are migratory warblers with striped chests and orange crests.



Ruby-crowned Kinglets are migratory too, and smaller than warblers.

Sweetgums

There are several **American Sweetgum** trees (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) in the park, mostly on the west side above and below City Hall. They get their name from the fragrant resin they produce. They are easy to recognize by their star-shaped leaves. Also by their hard, spiky seed balls that hang on the tree for a long time, and then lie on the ground below.



Tupelo

One small straight tree across from the chess tables in the northwest section of the park turned out to be a **Black Tupelo** (*Myssa sylvatica*). The name sounds southern (Elvis was born in Tupelo, Mississippi) but it grows throughout many areas of eastern North America. The Latin name refers to a forest water nymph, and the Native American name Tupelo means swamp tree. Perhaps an odd choice for planting in City Hall Park. There is a deep tap root and the trunk rises up as a straight shaft. Then at the top the branches come out perpendicularly, like a wavy head of hair.



Viburnums

These are more like shrubs than trees, but they can be quite dramatic. There are two types in City Hall Park that particularly caught my eye.



The **Japanese Snowball** (*Viburnum plicatum*) in the northwest section of the park suddenly dominates that area in May. It spreads out full skirts of white flowers with yellow centers, and they last for weeks.



The **Linden Viburnum** (*Linden dilatatum*) is over by the Broadway entrance to City Hall. I noticed it when I was looking at the linden trees, as their leaves are somewhat similar (although the trees' shapes are not). In the fall it has berries on it that later become red. The berries last into the winter and feed some of the birds. It is native to Asia, and in some places in the U.S. it has become invasive due to those birds eating the berries and dropping the seeds.



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City Hall Park

London plane horse chestnut
elm ailanthus ginkgo spruce
ancient trees young trees
tall proud witnesses
enriching my days
with quiet breath.
Would that I had
such endurance such patience.

Greens against blue
dappled light
on cracked grey stone
casting shadow drawings
slowing me down
focusing my eyes
stilling my heart.

Rella Stuart-Hunt