

Thieves Victimize Mother Nature

A Tree Nurtured for 25 Years And Given as a Gift Is Stolen

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For 25 years, Arlington County resident Peter Jones carefully tended a lace leaf Japanese maple tree growing in a black container in his back yard. Jones imagined the day that the tree, bought as a seedling, would outgrow its bin, finally old enough to shade a tract of empty land somewhere and able to spread its roots.

Last week, the tree found its home. It was planted with great pomp, complete with public officials and photo opportunities, outside the six-month-old Walter Reed Recreation Center in South Arlington, becoming the focal point on a slight knoll near a new playground. But yesterday morning, all that remained of the tree was a hole about two feet deep and a trail of rust-colored leaves and mulch leading to the parking lot.

The center and playground, on South 16th Street, quickly became a crime scene. Arlington police descended on the site shortly after the first employee arrived for work at 7:15 a.m. and noticed that the tree was missing. It had been stolen overnight, employees said.

Police said yesterday that they knew of no suspects or witnesses but that it would have taken landscaping tools and equipment to remove a tree that required about four men to plant. A report was taken, and if the thieves are caught, they can be charged with grand larceny, a felony, because the tree was worth about \$1,000, police said.

"This is such a shame," said Jones, 65, standing near the freshly dug hole yesterday afternoon with his wife, Caecilie Jones. "I mean, who would want to do something like that? A common thief, that's who."

Donating the maple, which was about as tall as a long-handled shovel, was always his intention, Jones said, but after caring for it like a child for more than two decades, it "really hurt" to learn that someone had ruthlessly ripped it from the earth.

Last week's tree-planting was done by several men and children after a ribbon-cutting ceremony to unveil the new playground. Residents and county officials were present for the big occasion, among them Arlington County Board Chairman Chris Zimmerman (D) and Dinesh Tiwari, director of the county's Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources.

Jones, a lifelong tree enthusiast who retired a few years ago from the federal government, began planning in 1999, when the recreation center plan was conceived, to make a gift of the tree.

He attended most of the meetings about the project and lobbied hard for a carefully crafted landscaping plan, one that would include exotic, rare plants such as the ginkgo and bald cypress trees that already line

the perimeter of the center.

And Jones knows enough about landscaping, having studied plants for most of his adult life. A perfectly shaped tabletop pine sits sturdily in a corner of his front yard. In the back, dozens of bonsai trees and pines line benches arrayed against the wooden fence. In the living room, a purple orchid rests near a floral-print couch among other potted plants.

"My intention was that people would become educated about all the trees and plants," he said, shaking his head sadly. "I'm determined that we get a beautiful, rare and choice landscaped area here. But how can you teach kids to respect it when grown-ups come and steal it?"

And so it was that Jones and Ike Sneed, facility manager at the recreation center, were left feeling like saps, angry with themselves for not chaining the tree into the ground. Such is the society: Even nature must be shackled, lest it be seized.

"Never again," Sneed said. "Once we get our landscaping plan down, we'll have to step up patrols. . . . We've been burned once, and we won't let it happen again."