

A TREE GROWS IN GAINESVILLE

By

Carl E. Whitcomb PhD

I arrived in Gainesville as an assistant professor in the Dept. of Ornamental Horticulture at the University of Florida in mid-August, 1967. On September 31 the phone rang. The caller introduced herself as Executive Assistant to Provost of the University of Florida Medical Center, Ms. Georgia Chotas. There was no chit-chat. Her first question was, bluntly, "Is it possible to grow an oriental planetree, *Platanus orientalis*, in Gainesville, Florida?" My answer was that I thought it would grow here. Her next question was "If you were to receive cuttings from a specific tree do you think you could get them to root so as to grow a tree identical to the parent?" Much tougher question! I responded that there was a reasonable likelihood that it could be done IF the cuttings were received at the proper time and in good condition. She then proceeds to inform me that such a project had already been approved by my Dept. Head, and that I should specify the time and condition of the cuttings as I could expect the cuttings sometime in the future. Thus began a fascinating experience for a very young and very green assistant professor that lasted over two years.

THE TREE, as it became known, was the oriental planetree under which Hippocrates, the physician, taught medicine in the early days of Greece and wrote the famous Hippocratic Oath. According to history and the Greek government the tree still exists and is located on the island of Kos, off the mainland. Information provided by the Greek government describes the tree as being roughly 2,500 years old and about 45 feet wide at the base and although ravaged by many storms has maintained its vitality by periodically sending up new branches from the main trunk. Marble columns support some of the main limbs.

THE GOAL was to reproduce that specific tree via cloning techniques long in use in the plant world in order to have an exact specimen near the University of Florida Medical Center.

THE PROPONENTS were the graduating class of medical doctors for 1969.

THE CHALLENGE was getting cuttings through the bureaucracy and at the proper time of year and hopefully fast enough so that the tissues would be fresh enough to have a reasonable chance of forming roots.

USDA rules allow the importation of cuttings of cultivars with well-defined unique characteristics of many species of plants. Some species are excluded due to the likelihood of introduction of disease. A check of the USDA list revealed that London planetree was approved for importation. BUT, the key word in

the regulations was cultivar (Horticultural jargon for a cultivated variety, or one with unique characteristics and capable of asexual propagation). The tree of Hippocrates was not a cultivar, but rather simply a seedling tree of historical significance. In filling out the forms for importing cuttings from the tree, I described it accurately and with some detail. Application denied. An appeal was launched. Denied. The end of the line? Not hardly, at least not for Ms. Chotas. She informed me that she would take care of the problem! She proceeds to contact Mr. Claude Pepper, long serving US House member from Florida. A few months later, and after filing more forms, USDA approval for importing the cuttings was granted.



Figure 1. The largest of the four trees was planted in an elaborate ceremony, June 14, 1969. >From left: Terry Marshall, Chairman of the graduating class of 1969, the author, Head, Dept. of Horticulture, Alcibiades Carokis, Consul, Greek Embassy, Dwight Wilbur, President, American Medical Assoc., Samuel Martin, Provost, University of Florida Medical Center, Stephen O'Connell, President, University of Florida, etc.

The cuttings were taken from the tree and in an elaborate ceremony at the Forestry Research Institute were presented by the Ambassador of Greece to America to the Charges d; Affaires of the American Embassy in Athens, Greece, then flown to Gainesville, via New York. The cuttings arrived in good condition and I was able to get four of the six to root. On June 14, 1969, the largest of the resulting trees was approx. 6 feet tall and was planted along Archer Road on the south side of the J. Hillis Miller Health Center (Figure 1). The Deputy Greek Ambassador, President of the American Medical Association and University of Florida officials, attended the planting ceremony.

A large plaque at the base of the tree reads as follows (Figure 2):

“This sycamore tree graciously given to the university of Florida, College of Medicine, by the Ministry of Agriculture of Greece was taken as a cutting from the tree on the island of Kos under which Hippocrates, according to legend, taught students of medicine. Hippocrates is remembered as a keen observer of the natural history of disease and as one who founded and practiced the guiding principles of modern clinical medicine. He is remembered also as a man who shared his knowledge of the art with aspiring students in a creative, forceful and inspirational manner. In keeping with these Hippocratic ideals of teaching, the medical class of 1969 now initiates an award to recognize each year that teacher who has most enriched the minds of students, thereby bringing excellence to his profession and distinction to himself.” June 14, 1969.



Figure 2. One bronze plaque contains the inscription noted above. The other, has a tree form and spaces for names of doctors elected by medical students as teacher of the year.

When I suggested that some soil preparations prior to planting would assist the tree, I was told to “do whatever it takes to assure success of the tree” and “cost is not a limitation”. Fifteen truckloads of near pure sand soil were removed and replaced with sandy clay soil from about 35 miles away. This soil was tested and all nutrient elements necessary for good plant growth were added. As a final touch, the tree was provided its own irrigation system with an automatic moisture sensor to provide optimum watering.

Today the tree is spectacular, with a height of more than 50 feet, excellent branching and a diameter at the base of 26 inches. The bark of the main stem and branches is near white with patches of gray. The clone of the tree Hippocrates chose as a site to teach medicine is alive and well in Gainesville, Florida. Persons wishing

to view the tree should proceed east on Archer Road from the I-75 exit to the medical center. Look for the tree on the north side of the road, approx. half way between the edge of the road and the Shands Teaching Hospital (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The cloned offspring of the ‘Tree of Hippocrates’ as it appeared in 2002.

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