

Which Trees Should We Protect?¹

This Draft Staff report summarizes the policies of the County and other local government jurisdictions that classify the types of trees that are protected in each jurisdiction. Individual trees or groups of trees may be considered important community resources because of unique or noteworthy characteristics or values. Such trees have been described in ordinances as heritage, historic, landmark, legacy, special interest, significant, or specimen trees. Some component of tree size, most frequently trunk diameter, is used to define a special status tree, e.g., a given diameter at 4.5 ft. above grade (i.e., diameter at breast height or DBH) is used as the size standard. Additional rules are typically needed to handle trees that are multi-trunked, or branch below 4.5 ft. Because the relationships between DBH and canopy spread, or DBH and tree age vary by species, and due to a range of other factors, different tree diameter standards may be applied to different species. (Pytosphere)

The policies and criteria that designate trees as significant or heritage vary greatly from county to county and city to city. The following summarizes these policies:

Heritage Trees In San Mateo County:

Class 1 shall include any tree or grove of trees so designated after Board inspection, advertised public hearing and resolution by the Board of Supervisors. The affected property owners shall be given proper written notice between 14 and 30 days prior to inspection and/or hearing by the Board.

Class 2 shall include any of the following trees, healthy and generally free from disease, with **diameter** equal to or greater than the sizes listed:

- (1) *Acer macrophyllum* - Bigleaf Maple of more than 36 inches in d.b.h. west of Skyline Boulevard or 28 inches east of Skyline Boulevard.
- (2) *Arbutus menziesii* - Madrone with a single stem or multiple stems touching each other 4 1/2 feet above the ground of more than 48 inches in d.b.h., or clumps visibly connected above ground with a basal area greater than 20 square feet measured 4 1/2 feet above average ground level.
- (3) *Chrysolepis chrysophylla* - Golden Chinquapin of more than 20 inches in d.b.h.
- (4) *Cupressus abramsiana* - All Santa Cruz Cypress trees.
- (5) *Fraxinus latifolia* - Oregon Ash of more than 12 inches in d.b.h.
- (6) *Lithocarpus densiflorus* - Tan Oak of more than 48 inches in d.b.h.
- (7) *Pseudotsuga menziesii* – Douglas Fir of more than 60 inches in d.b.h. east of Skyline Boulevard and north of Highway 92.

¹ Staff has postponed the Steering Committee's discussion of policies for protection of exotic trees until its January meeting, due to the unavailability of experts on the topic for the November meeting.

- (8) Quercus agrifolia - Coast Live Oak of more than 48 inches in d.b.h.
- (9) Quercus chrysolepis - Canyon Live Oak of more than 40 inches in d.b.h.
- (10) Quercus garryana - All Oregon White Oak trees.
- (11) Quercus kelloggii - Black Oak of more than 32 inches in d.b.h.
- (12) Quercus wislizenii - Interior Live Oak of more than 40 inches in d.b.h.
- (13) Quercus lobata - Valley Oak of more than 48 inches in d.b.h.
- (14) Quercus douglasii - Blue Oak of more than 30 inches in d.b.h.
- (15) Umbellularia californica - California Bay or Laurel with a single stem or multiple stems touching each other 4 1/2 feet above the ground of more than 48 inches in d.b.h., or clumps visibly connected above ground with a basal area of 20 square feet measured 4 1/2 feet above average ground level.
- (16) Torreya californica - California Nutmeg of more than 30 inches in d.b.h.
- (17) Sequoia sempervirens - Redwood of more than 84 inches in d.b.h. west of Skyline Boulevard or 72 inches d.b.h. east of Skyline Boulevard.

Significant Trees. In San Mateo County, significant trees are: “any live woody plant rising above the ground with a single stem or trunk of a circumference of thirty-eight inches (38”) or more measured at four and one half feet (4 1/2”) vertically above the ground or immediately below the lowest branch, whichever is lower, and having the inherent capacity of naturally producing one main axis continuing to grow more vigorously than the lateral axes...In the RH/DR Zone Districts the definition of significant tree shall include all trees in excess of nineteen inches (19”) in circumference.” [six inches diameter]

Resource Management District. Removal of living trees with a trunk circumference of 55 inches at four and a half feet above the average surface of the ground is prohibited, except as may be required for [approved] development.

The County’s local coastal program (LCP) incorporates the tree protection policies above.

Other Local Government Policies. The following table summarizes the policies used by other local governments to establish classes, sizes, types or species of trees to protect:

Agency	Heritage Trees	Other Tree Regulations	Other Reg (con)
Palo Alto	Designated by City Council, considered "Protected" Tree, can be any size, nominated for historical significance	Coast Live Oak/Valley Oak DBH 11.5 in. Redwood DBH 18 in.	Designated Trees = any tree protected by city on public or private property

Agency	Heritage Trees	Other Tree Regulations	Other Reg (con)
Menlo Park	1) Tree(s) of historical significance, special character/benefit, designated by city council	Heritage (continued): DBH minima vary from 31.4-47.1 in. depending on species	All tree regulations defined as "Heritage" in Menlo park
City of San Mateo	Specific species with minimum DBH of 10 in.	All other species are heritage if DBH≥16 in.	Any tree designated by city council (of historic value or community benefit)
City of San Mateo San Carlos	Specific species with minimum DBH of 10 in. Indigenous trees: minimum circumference varies per species: 24-72 in. any tree that existed before 1925	All other species are heritage if DBH≥16 in. Significant Tree: Any Tree w/ circumference at least 36 in.	Any tree designated by city council (of historic value or community benefit) Protected Tree: Any significant or heritage tree. The city prohibits some species from being heritage regardless of size
San Carlos Santa Clara County	Indigenous trees: minimum circumference varies per species: 24-72 in. any tree that existed before 1925 Historical heritage Commission and BOS adopt heritage trees based on "history, girth, height, species, or other unique quality"	Significant Tree: Any Tree w/ circumference at least 36 in. Protected Tree: DBH 12 in. or more. In historic preservation district, any trunk DBH greater than 6 in. is protected. Also, any tree that was required to be planted for a permit/approval is protected	Protected Tree: Any significant or heritage tree. The city prohibits some species from being heritage regardless of size Some zones have multi-trunk protected tree status when DBH is 24 in. or more. Protected trees include trees on property owned by the county DBH 12 in. or more, or any tree on County ROW/easements
Santa Clara County	Historical heritage Commission and BOS adopt heritage trees based on "history, girth, height, species, or other unique quality" DBH at least 12 in.	Protected Tree: DBH 12 in. or more. In historic preservation district, any trunk DBH greater than 6 in. is protected. Also, any tree that was required to be planted for a permit/approval is protected Heritage trees any trees designated by BOS with historical, environmental, aesthetic value	Some zones have multi-trunk protected tree status when DBH is 24 in. or more. Protected trees include trees on property owned by the county DBH 12 in. or more, or any tree on County ROW/easements

Agency	Heritage Trees	Other Tree Regulations	Other Reg (con)
<p>Half Moon Bay Santa Cruz County</p>	<p>DBH at least 12 in. No heritage tree policies.</p>	<p>Heritage trees any trees designated by BOS with historical, environmental, aesthetic value Significant tree inside service line: at least 20 in. DBH. A sprout clump of at least 12 in. DBH. Outside of service line: DBH greater than 40 in. (larger requirements)</p>	<p>HMB also specifies trees in certain Rights of Way as heritage trees Different regulations for inside or outside urban/rural services line ... any trees located in a "sensitive habitat"</p>

Most local governments surveyed give heritage status only to native species, but many use a one-size-fits-all policy for heritage trees, including Half Moon Bay, while the City of San Mateo defines heritage trees to include certain species with a DBH ≥ 10 inches or any tree with diameter of 16 inches or greater, measured at 48 inches above natural grade. In the City of Sonoma, any tree with diameter of 50 inches or more, measured at 24 inches above natural grade is a heritage tree. Sonoma County does not define the trees that qualify for heritage status. Instead, trees or groves of trees must be nominated by the public to the Planning Director, inspected by County staff, and then approved by the Board of Supervisors. Santa Clara County established a very similar process to Sonoma County, protecting unique trees on an individual basis.

Marin County. Marin County policies list 36 native species and corresponding minimum diameter at breast height (6 or 10 inches depending on species) that qualify for heritage status, and differentiate between trees on unimproved lots and trees on improved lots; trees on unimproved lots are afforded more protection. Protected if on an unimproved lot:

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| <i>Acer macrophyllum</i> Big-leaf maple 10 inches | <i>Q. chrysolepis</i> Canyon live oak 6 inches |
| <i>A. negundo</i> var. <i>californicum</i> Box elder 10 inches | <i>Q. douglasii</i> Blue oak 6 inches |
| <i>Aesculus californica</i> California buckeye 10 inches | <i>Q. garryana</i> Oregon oak 6 inches |
| <i>Alnus rhombifolia</i> White alder 10 inches | <i>Q. kelloggii</i> California black oak 6 inches |
| <i>A. rubra</i> Red alder 10 inches | <i>Q. lobata</i> Valley oak 6 inches |
| <i>Amelanchier alnifolia</i> Service-berry 10 inches | <i>Q. parvula</i> var. <i>shrevei</i> Oak 6 inches |
| <i>Arbutus menziesii</i> Pacific Madrone 6 inches | <i>Q. wislizeni</i> Chaparral oak 6 inches |
| <i>Castanopsis chrysophylla</i> Giant Chinquapin 10 inches | <i>Salix exigua</i> Narrow leaved willow 6 inches |
| <i>Cercocarpus betuloides</i> Mountain-mahogany 10 inches | <i>S. laevigata</i> Red willow 6 inches |
| <i>Crataegus douglasii</i> Hawthorn 10 inches | <i>S. lasiolepis</i> Arroyo willow 6 inches |
| <i>Cupressus sargentii</i> Sargent cypress 6 inches | <i>S. lucida</i> ssp. <i>lasiandra</i> Shining willow 6 inches |
| <i>Fraxinus latifolia</i> Oregon ash 10 inches | <i>S. scouleriana</i> Scouler's willow 6 inches |
| <i>Garrya elliptica</i> Silk tassel 10 inches | <i>S. sitchensis</i> Sitka willow 6 inches |
| <i>Lithocarpus densiflorus</i> Tanbark oak 10 inches | <i>Sambucus callicarpa</i> Red elderberry 10 inches |
| <i>Myrica californica</i> Wax myrtle 10 inches | <i>Sequoia sempervirens</i> Coast redwood 10 inches |
| <i>Pinus muricata</i> Bishop pine 10 inches | <i>Taxus brevifolia</i> Pacific yew 10 inches |
| <i>Pseudotsuga menziesii</i> Douglas-fir 10 inches | <i>Torreya californica</i> California nutmeg 10 inches |
| <i>Quercus agrifolia</i> Coast live oak 6 inches | <i>Umbellularia californica</i> California bay 10 inches |

Policy Options. The following policy options exclude discussion of exotic trees, due to a request from some Steering Committee members to invite experts on the subject to join us for our consideration of policy options for exotic tree protection/removal. The options presented here are focused on the policies addressing native and endemic trees.

Based on staff's review of the policies of other nearby jurisdictions, in comparison to San Mateo County's Significant and Heritage Tree Removal ordinances, we concluded that the County has a relatively protective regulatory scheme. Since reducing protection of trees in the County is extremely unlikely and undesirable from staff's perspective, the policy options discussed below range from no changes to options that would increase protection of trees.

Option 1. No Change. Leave the thresholds for: (1) significant trees at ≥ 38 -inch circumference measured at four and one half feet (4 1/2') vertically above the ground, or 19-inch circumference in RH/DR districts; (2) leave species and sizes for heritage trees unchanged; and (3) continue to prohibit removal of trees ≥ 55 inches in circumference at BH in the RM district unless required for development permitted under the RM Ordinance or permitted under the timber harvesting ordinance, or for reason of actual or potential danger to life or property.

Option 2. Increase protection for native species by reducing the sizes of trees currently classified as heritage trees. Under this option, County policy could be amended to reduce the size of some or all trees currently listed as heritage trees. Depending on sizes chosen, some trees that are currently classified as significant trees would be protected under the heritage tree ordinance. This policy approach would elevate the status of smaller native and endemic trees to heritage status, which is not a significant change, since the findings required for approval of significant and heritage tree removals are quite similar.

Option 3. Reduce the size of significant trees subject to protection policies. Currently, significant trees are defined as 38-inch circumference at breast height (12"-DBH), except in Emerald Lake Hills/Oak Knoll where significant trees are defined as 19-inch circumference at breast height (6"-DBH). The minimum standard could be lowered to 10-inch DBH or lower wherever the tree ordinances apply, e.g., outside RM and PAD zones.

Option 4. Combine Significant and Heritage Tree categories. The County could create one category of heritage trees with the current list of heritage tree sizes (perhaps adjusted lower) and specific sizes defining all other heritage trees, such as all trees 10-inch DBH and larger are heritage trees.