

WHAT IS A TREE WARDEN?

Caring for the community's trees in the Commonwealth

A tree warden is the person in charge of shade trees in towns and cities. The word “warden” was a common title for natural resource officials in the late 1800s. Being a warden signified a unique legal responsibility: to guard public resources against destructive forces that might include persons, insects, or diseases.

Since 1899, Massachusetts General Law has mandated that all cities and towns in the Commonwealth have a tree warden. The tree warden mandate is still in effect today under Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 41, Section 1 and Section 106.

For a recent scholarly analysis on tree wardens, see Julie Steiner, J.D., *Guardians of Municipal Public Trees: Commonwealth of Massachusetts Tree Warden's Authority and Accountability*.

A tree warden may be either elected by the people or appointed by the city or town. In either case, the responsibility is the same – to oversee the care, maintenance, or removal of public shade trees. As both manager and advocate, the tree warden must protect the trees and protect the public from the trees.



Boston



Tree warden training

What Do Tree Wardens Do?

The scope of a tree warden's job is broad. In addition to having responsibility for trees along streets, a tree warden may have responsibility for all community trees – those in town commons, parks, schoolyards, and town forests. The position of tree warden requires qualified training in arboriculture, the science of tree care. A tree warden should also have good communication skills for dealing with the public, municipal departments and committees, and local politicians.

The job may be physically challenging as well. On a day-to-day basis, a tree warden must plan, organize, control, and be accountable for all authorized activities in the public community forest, including:

- Pruning trees
- Removing trees that are dead or dying (from storms, insects, disease, or old age)
- Identifying appropriate planting sites
- Planting new trees
- Creating, updating, or utilizing a tree inventory
- Assessing trees for risk
- Overseeing utility arboricultural operations
- Reviewing site plans
- Preparing budget presentations
- Supervising municipal tree workers
- Creating bid proposals for contract tree work
- Inspecting contracted tree work
- Planning, implementing, and overseeing tree protection related to construction activities
- Conducting public meetings and tree hearings
- Writing grant proposals
- Communicating and coordinating with the local tree committee or advocacy group



The Position of Tree Warden in a Community

The position of tree warden may be based in a public works, highway, parks, cemetery, or other department, or it may be completely separate. The position may be supported by salary or stipend. In some cases, tree warden duties may comprise only a portion of the duties of a position.

Qualifications for Tree Wardens

MGL Chapter 41, Section 106 requires that appointed tree wardens in towns and cities with populations greater than 10,000 “be qualified by training and experience in the field of arboriculture and licensed with the department of food and agriculture [...]” The term of the appointment was set at three years. The license which is referred to above is a pesticide license. This license does not certify whether or not a person is “qualified by training and experience in the field of arboriculture.”

To help establish a standard for qualification in Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Tree Wardens’ and Foresters’ Association created an educational training program for tree wardens in 2017. The Massachusetts Qualified Tree Warden program is designed to provide a base of knowledge for tree wardens in Massachusetts, especially for those in smaller communities that may not be able to hire a tree warden with industry-standard qualifications. While not defined by law in Massachusetts, industry-standard qualifications may include ISA Certified Arborist, Massachusetts Certified Arborist, Associate or Bachelor’s Degree in Arboriculture, Urban Forestry, or a closely related field.

About MTWFA

Founded in 1913, the Massachusetts Tree Wardens’ and Foresters’ Association is a non-profit organization that serves tree wardens, municipal arborists, utility arborists, commercial arborists and companies, educational professionals, and citizen tree advocates in the care, management, and preservation of the urban and community forest. This text is adapted from ‘What is a Tree Warden?’ on the MTWFA website. Find out more at www.masstreewardens.org.

REFERENCES:

- Mass. General Laws
<https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws>
- Steiner, J.D. *Guardians of Municipal Public Trees*
<https://digitalcommons.law.wne.edu/facschol/321/>
- Mass. Tree Wardens’ and Foresters’ Association
www.masstreewardens.org
- Who is My Tree Warden?
<https://masstreewardens.org/who-is-my-tree-warden/>

What is a Public Shade Tree?

The Public Shade Tree Law, Massachusetts General Law (MGL) Ch. 87, defines public shade trees as “all trees within a public way or on the boundaries thereof,” including trees planted within 20 feet of the edge of the right of way, as defined in Section 7. The tree warden may also be responsible for trees in parks and other open spaces if designated under the provisions of Section 2 of Chapter 87. Tree wardens do not have jurisdiction over trees along state highways.

Bureau of Forestry

Urban & Community
Forestry Program

Massachusetts Department of
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251 Causeway Street, Suite 600
Boston, MA 02114

www.mass.gov/dcr/ucf



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