

# Old pear tree showing ‘vigor’ after 150 years

By Sara Bruestle | Mar 14, 2012  
*The Mukilteo Beacon*



*Courtesy of: Scott Baker*

Scott Baker, a consulting arborist with Seattle-based Tree Solutions Inc., taps sensors of a tomograph into the Fowler Pear Tree in Old Town. The device uses sound waves to produce 3-D images that help arborists analyze the overall health of the tree.

With roots to early Mukilteo, the preservation of an old pear tree in Old Town has been of great concern.

Known as the Fowler Pear Tree, it was planted circa 1863 by Mukilteo co-founder Jacob D. Fowler. The tree is located in the tiny park at 802 Mukilteo Lane. It still bears fruit.

The tree is cared for by the Mukilteo Way Garden Club, and has been for nearly 60 years.

At the club’s request, a local tree consulting company recently analyzed and released a report on the condition of the pear tree. The prognosis: The tree will be fine for the next 1-5 years, likely longer.

“They’re very hopeful that it’s going to continue to live for quite awhile,” said Jean Skerlong, a member of the garden club. “They don’t have a magic ball, but they said they don’t foresee any problems within the next five years.”

The Seattle-based Tree Solutions Inc. reported that the tree shows signs of “good vigor” with healthy growth and re-growth over past damages; however, it also has signs of significant decay.

“A tree like that one is just amazing,” said Scott Baker, a registered consulting arborist for Tree Solutions. “It’s just a shell of a tree, but the tree has been trying to and successfully has been growing a structure to keep itself strong and upright.”

Amazing as it is, the 150-year-old tree is showing its age. It has withstood numerous storms, and has the damage and subsequent re-growth to prove it. It lost a second trunk that left a hole on the eastern side and has been hollowed by decay.

Tree Solutions analyzed the tree on Dec. 27 with a tomograph, a device that uses sound waves to produce cross-section images of the trunk. The 3-D images show the levels of growth and decay.

The consultation – worth about \$1,300 – was provided to the city for free due to the tree’s historical importance.

According to the report, the tree trunk appears strong enough to support its branches, and vice versa. The living parts of the trunk are growing clockwise in a spiral up the tree around the decaying parts, which is normal and healthy.

However, current conditions around its roots limit the tree’s ability to do so.

The tree is the Mukilteo Way Garden Club’s “continuing project.” Members created the tiny landscaped park that features the tree, and have weeded, planted and pruned there since 1953.

What may be surprising is that gardening is actually hurting the tree more than helping it.

“The tree is stressed because, when the park was built around it, they changed the conditions beneath the tree rather radically,” Baker said.

Grass roots directly compete with the tree’s roots. Excess soil and mulch around the tree promotes decay, but too much cleanup around the garden bed makes it harder for roots to grow.

Pruning is also unnecessary, unless it is done to help balance the tree’s structure. The practice is usually implemented to increase production of fruit.

With a historical tree, Baker said, the focus should be on the strength of the tree’s trunk and branches, not its fruit.

Garden club member Shirley Hoffart said they will be changing their gardening practices to help the tree, and will be following preservation tips provided in the report.

“We want to keep it going as long as we can,” she said. “We don’t have it like back East where everything goes back. 1863 was pretty long ago for us.”

The historic tree was part of an orchard Fowler planted. He was Mukilteo’s first merchant and trader and head of the town’s first post office. Some say it was dedicated to his daughter, Louisa, who was born in 1862.

The 29-foot-tall 'Seckel' pear tree is all that is left of the orchard, and is a state registered historic landmark. It is likely the oldest pear tree in Washington state.

As such, the life of the tree has been a concern for many, including the Mukilteo Historical Society and the South Everett-Mukilteo Rotary Club.

The city has had several arborists take cuttings to root in a nursery to try to preserve the line. None of them have taken root.

Trying again, Bill Davis of the Western Washington Fruit Research Foundation took cuttings from the tree at the end of January.

"We're very hopeful that this year they will be more successful," Skerlong said, "but of course we're mostly concerned with keeping this tree alive rather than an offshoot of it."