

Ginkgo to Go

by Jon Vara

When a building project comes into conflict with a big tree, the solution usually involves a chainsaw. But that's not the only option. If the tree is rich in scenic, sentimental, or historical value and the budget is sized to match, Capital Tree Locators can probably help. The Austin, Texas-based company specializes in transplanting mature trees and will travel just about anywhere in the U.S. to do it.

To move the 70-foot ginkgo tree shown here, company employees loaded a truck with equipment and supplies — including a powerful air-operated pipe-driving machine and over a thousand feet of high-pressure oil-rig pipe — and drove nearly 2,000 miles to the site of a high-end residential remodeling project in the Boston area. On arrival, the crew painstakingly hand-dug an 18-inch-deep trench around the tree,

defining a root mat that measured about 32 feet in diameter.

"You can't use an excavator for the initial trench, or you'll tear the roots," says company president Shaun Welborn. Any small-diameter feeder roots that extend beyond the trench, he explains, are carefully severed with small bow saws. The initial hand-dug trench was then deepened to 36 inches with an excavator.

Contrary to what many people assume, Welborn says, the root systems of most trees lie within a very few feet of the surface. Young trees often gain support from a deep-reaching central taproot, but it becomes less and less important as the tree develops a broad network of feeder roots and frequently dies off by the time the tree reaches maturity. (If necessary, Welborn's crews cut the taproot of a mature tree by anchoring one end of a steel cable to

the tow hook on an excavator and threading it under the root mat before fastening the other end to the excavator's boom. When the machine is carefully worked back and forth, the cable quickly slices through the resistant root like an enormous coping saw.)

The exposed root mat was wrapped in several layers of burlap and wire mesh, and closely spaced steel pipes were driven horizontally beneath it to create the structural "floor" that would support the 450,000-pound weight of tree and soil. Finally, a system of steel I-beams, hydraulic jacks, and a powerful crane were used to ease the tree onto a flatbed trailer for the move to its new home, 100 yards away.

That sort of expertise doesn't come cheap. The ginkgo project cost about \$100,000, and that's far from the biggest job Capital Tree has undertaken. Welborn notes that his company recently placed a \$250,000 bid on a proposal to move a 1,500,000-pound Florida ficus tree.

That's a lot of money, but many of Capital's customers are developers or corporations with the business sense to see leafy shade as a profitable investment. "If you're working on a big development," Welborn asks, "what's \$200,000 in the grand scheme of things? Big trees make a huge difference in how a place looks and whether people want to live there."

To illustrate, he describes a recent Texas project in which his company lined the main drive of a high-end subdivision with 18 mature trees relocated from the back of the property. "It took weeks to get everything ready but only a couple of days to actually move the trees," he recalls. "People who were away at the time drove right past the end of the drive. They just didn't recognize the place."



Employees of Capital Tree Locators coax a 40-inch-diameter ginkgo tree — thought to be one of the largest in Massachusetts — toward a site elsewhere on the property where it will be transplanted. To help the nearly two-century-old tree adapt to its new environment, it will be replanted at its original compass orientation and at the same slight tilt from the vertical.