

# The (Very Gentle) Fight to Save a Downtown “Food Forest”

A band of merry pranksters wants to resurrect an urban farming utopia — if they can save it from the developer’s ax.

by **SANDY HINGSTON**. 7/7/2018, 9:00 p.m.



Dale Hendricks sizes up a bur oak at the Quaker meetinghouse.

Photography by Rob Cardillo

Dale Hendricks picks up a honey locust pod, snaps it open, and prods with his thumb at the glutinous lining. “Pigs will sell their souls for these things,” he says. “Have a taste.”

We’re standing on a strip of lawn between a retirement community and a “professional plaza” along Route 30 in Downtown, on a winter day so cold that I can’t feel my feet.

I take the pod he offers, scrape gingerly at the goo, and lick my fingertip. It’s reminiscent of maple syrup, densely sweet. “Thirty-five percent sugar,” Dale says. “It was selected for that sweetness.” I pass the pod along to Downtown planning commission member Adrian Martinez, another of the six of us

who’ve made this trek to see John Hershey’s trees while we still can.

We gathered just across the road at the Quaker meetinghouse, parking near two big bur oaks Hershey planted there.

Dale, our fearless leader, has already taught us how to spot the hundreds of Hershey trees dotting Downtown: Many have a line partway up their trunks where a “scion,” or cutting, was grafted onto a rootstock decades ago. Nurseries propagate by grafting to get exact copies of trees they want to



An especially visible graft line on the heartnut tree outside Hershey's homestead.

reproduce; when you grow trees from seed, “You wind up with what they call ‘the dog’s breakfast,’” Dale says — any motley old thing. He has on a black cap with ear flaps that lace in the front; with his sharp face and scruffy beard, he looks like the guy who pumps your gas. That’s deceptive, just like Hershey’s trees.

The one that shed our honey locust pod seems like any other tree at first glance. When you look closer, though, Dale shows us, it has a few stubby branches with lethal-looking four-inch thorns springing from the rootstock, while the longer, spreading branches above the graft are thorn-free. That’s what Hershey was aiming for: a kinder, gentler honey locust, with sweeter pods and without thorns so long and sharp that they pop tractor tires.

The ground beneath our frozen toes is littered with nuts from nearby trees: walnuts, butternuts, hickory nuts. “Junk trees. Dirty trees — that’s what suburban people call them,” Dale says, contemplating their bare branches. “They don’t want ’em.” These trees may look like mere trees. But to John Hershey, they were the best of the best.

Dale shows us a persimmon tree on the grounds of Downingtown United Methodist Church, next to the retirement community. It bears fruits that look like shiny apricots — the Latin name means “food of the gods” — from August through November. “We pick them up off the ground,” Dale says. “The Methodists are our friends.” He glints a wink. “People from the old folks’ home asked us: ‘What are you doing?’ So we introduced them to the vision Hershey had.”

Hershey’s vision was for a better kind of American farm, one that took full advantage of what he called the “Orbit of Nature.” He wanted to optimize what God in his glory had provided and teach America to make the most of it. He foresaw farmers chilling on their front porches while all around them, nut and fruit trees rained down their bounty on the land, fattening livestock even as they replenished the soil.

“We’ve been making a persimmon mead,” Dale mentions.

Okay, well, there’s that, too.

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**JOHN W. HERSHEY** was born around 1900, and in his youth, he worked for a well-known nurseryman in Lancaster, J.F. Jones, who taught him the trade. Hershey then opened his own nursery in Downingtown, across from the Quaker meetinghouse. In the 1930s, as a prolonged drought sent parched topsoil swirling into the skies above America, he became alarmed by the doom the “Dust Bowl” portended. “Man in his progress of the last century nearly ruined the climatic balance by wrecking the forests and soils of this great and productive continent,” he warned in a slim exhortatory volume he self-published, called *Nature’s Orbits, Man’s Profit*. “This living, vibrating leaven, yeast, that we trample and abuse, known as soil — the living dust from which every thing comes must have everything returned to it. ...”

Through his soil activism, Hershey came to know a kindred soul, Wharton professor J. Russell Smith, who wangled him a government job with the Tennessee Valley Authority. There, as part of FDR’s New Deal, Hershey further honed his vision for the future. Convinced that American farming methods had caused the Dust Bowl, he proposed that instead of planting vast acres of a single crop like wheat or corn, farmers grow strips of grass and grain interspersed with rows of trees. The trees would anchor the precious topsoil and provide shade for the crops in summer; their fruits and nuts would save farmers money on feed for chickens and cows and pigs.

But not just any trees. At the TVA, Hershey’s quest became to find and reproduce the very best native American trees: oaks with less-tannic acorns, the heaviest-fruited mulberries, the thinnest-shelled pecans. He combed the Tennessee Valley, grafting saplings, planting a testing ground, tracking down renowned trees, even running contests for those with the best-tasting persimmons and sweetest honey locust pods.

J. Russell Smith, who greatly admired the fact that Hershey had “not had the disadvantage of an agricultural college course,” cited his work liberally in his book *Tree Crops: A Permanent Agriculture*, now considered a bible of a movement known as permaculture:

*I have pleasure in showing the field plan and crop plan of a tree-crops farm that is not a hypothesis but a fact. Mr. John W. Hershey, R.F.D. 1,*

*Downingtown, Pennsylvania, is a man of creative mind, enthusiasm for country living, soil conservation, and trees — crop trees.*

Hershey was with the TVA for just four years; after being diagnosed with cancer, he returned to Downingtown, to continue his lifework there. In 1945, he relocated his nursery to what he anointed “the No. 1 Tree-Crops Farm of America,” on 72 acres just off North Guthriesville Road that are now the site of a 1980s development known as the Villages at Timberlake.

It’s even easier to see Hershey’s remnants here than by the old folks’ home. There are more of the telltale straight rows of trees — three persimmons in a line, seven oaks, a dozen grafted English walnuts — among the houses and townhomes. “This is the oldest intact food forest anywhere,” Dale says as he shows us around. “This whole thing was Hershey’s nut farm. See those big shrubs?” He nods across the road. “The owners of that house wanted to know why their lilacs weren’t blooming. They aren’t lilacs; they’re hazelnuts. They’re left over from Hershey, like all the tree treasures here.”

At 65, Dale is, admittedly, an old hippie. Self-taught like Hershey, he can identify a half dozen kinds of oaks — white, bur, red, pin — by sight even when their branches are bare. He used to own a nursery where he propagated native plants; now he runs a smaller plant business and also serves as an itinerant preacher on ecology and trees: “I try to communicate new ideas, bring the young folks along, have a little fun.”

There are three such young folks in our scouting party today. There’s Jono Droege, one of eight protesters arrested in 2015 for trying to block drilling for the Atlantic Sunrise gas pipeline in Lancaster County. Jono lives in Manheim with his friends Donna Volles and Harrison Rhodes, also here today, on Rising Locust Farm, where they’re incorporating some of Hershey’s ideas. “Last spring, we put about 800 trees in a 20-acre pasture,” Harrison tells me, “all with leaves that are edible for cattle and sheep. Every fourth tree is a timber tree or nut tree. Trees and grassland sequester a ton of carbon and really build the soil. Grasses don’t grow so well in summer, when it gets hot, but the trees act as a water pump and make it cooler and shadier. That should increase grass yields.”

If all this sounds vaguely reminiscent of the 1960s and the *Whole Earth Catalog*, it is. The basic tenets of permaculture weren’t new even in Hershey’s time; trees have been grown alongside crops in lots of other countries for centuries. (Think of the hillside farms in Tuscany, or Greek olive farms.) What made Hershey an effective salesman for permaculture in America was his

sense of urgency, driven by the Dust Bowl's desolation. In the many speeches he delivered and promotional pamphlets he wrote, he was part of that great early-20th-century outburst of American energy that brought us Prohibition and Kellogg's cornflakes and Ford cars and revivalist religion.

Hershey liked to say he wasn't a writer; "I've devoted my life to 'doing,'" he wrote in *Nature's Orbits*. "I use language to get an idea under the other person's hat." And yet his writing pulses with vibrant determination:

*Ever cross your mind, the violence and the violent struggle, needed to get into the stream of life? Think about the force of an acorn, walnut, or any seed that bursts forth from its shell, furiously sending down roots. ... I nose-dived into the stream flow of life — plunged from the matrix, hands forward, head down, nose projected out, ready to plunge through life like a diver and will continue so until I die.*

Dale seems tailor-made for spreading Hershey's gospel. He jokes that we won't get arrested tramping through people's backyards so long as borough official Adrian is with us. He's cultivated allies here at the Villages at Timberlake, including the family in whose driveway we park our cars. "We have friendly people everywhere," he says conspiratorially. He's brought a thermos of hickory-nut tea to warm us, and he throws in history lessons as we traipse through Hershey's plantings. "The Native Americans had really productive landscapes," he says. "They were intensely managed, but not in a way that Europeans recognized. The Natives were itinerant, moving from camp to camp. Settlers got a lot of property along the Brandywine River that way. When the Indians moved camp and went away, the settlers built there. The Indians would come back and say, 'What the fuck?' And the settlers would shrug and say, 'You were gone.'"

Dale has memorized the sketch of Hershey's No. 1 Tree-Crops Farm that's reproduced in *Tree Crops*. "This is the stream on the map," he says. "The pond is new, man-made. See that chestnut tree? The bag of nuts I'm sending home with you," he tells Jono, "a lot came from that tree."

Hershey's homestead is still here, a stone-and-log house that's been added onto over the years. It has a FOR SALE sign out front, along with a grafted heartnut tree. Grafted onto the back is a glass addition that houses an indoor swimming pool. "Grotesque," Adrian mutters, frowning at it.



Dale eyeing heartnut flowers.

“It can be yours,” Dale tells him, “if you have \$600,000 or \$700,000 lying around. Look at those mulberry trees. Those yield berries over a long period. In the Middle East, they dry them.”

“We need to get a drying room,” Harrison tells Jono and Donna. “Like the drying rooms in Corsica — that’s what we need. We could dry persimmons, mulberries, mushrooms ...” Both millennial men have beards above their plaid shirts. Actually, boomer Adrian has one, too.

“You’d never know any of this was here unless you were looking,” I tell Dale.

“It’s like a parallel universe,” he agrees.

“It’s a miracle so much still exists,” says Adrian.

Dale nods. “Usually people say, ‘Oh, we had a big mulberry, but it just rained berries down on our car.’” For him, there are levels to his mission, like the canopy and understory of a forest. “I want to dial people into the landscape,” he explains. “I’m trying to learn about how we can have more nurturing, carbon-friendly farms. Ecosystem restoration. That’s the big-picture stuff. As for the little picture, I want this handful of trees appreciated and saved, and the vision behind them saved, too.”

Adrian’s thinking on a grander scale. “I want Downingtown to survive,” he says. “That’s why I’m on the planning commission. To survive, you have to be a place apart from other places.” He sees Hershey’s No. 1 Tree-Crops Farm as “an extraordinary gift at the right time. This is Downingtown, not some executive decision: ‘We’re going to have a fall fest.’ ‘We’ll have a Burning Man.’” He envisions a more organic annual civic celebration centered on Hershey and his trees, with downtown restaurants featuring foods made from the pecans and pawpaws. It could be, he says, “an incredible cultural, tribal event.”

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**THE VILLAGES IS AN OLD**, established housing division; it's not likely the trees there will be cut down anytime soon. But Hershey was a real Johnny Nut-Graft: "He infected the whole neighborhood," Dale says. Hershey planted his trees all along Downingtown's main thoroughfare, Route 30; they dot the landscape like ghosts, still faithfully producing their carefully selected crops. There are dozens of big specimens — chestnuts, oaks, "hicans," which are hybrids of hickories and pecans — just off Woodbine Road on the grounds of St. John Vianney, a Catholic home for wayward clergy. And those trees are in danger. One of the biggest developers in Chester County, Eli Kahn, bought 15 acres of the Archdiocese's food-forested frontage along Route 30 and is planning to build 225 luxury apartments there.

Kahn kick-started a Downingtown revival when, in 1993, he bought the town's abandoned Pepperidge Farm plant and turned it into what's now the Downingtown Tech Center, home to dozens of businesses, from graphic design firms to a School of Rock to the iconic Victory Brewing Company. Kahn's firm, EKahn Development, has resuscitated old plants in other Chester County towns and turned them into commercial spaces. In a conference room at his headquarters — one such handsome restoration, just down the hill from the train station in Malvern — Kahn explains his philosophy to me:

"When Pepperidge Farm left, it was a real hit to the tax base in Downingtown. Eleven hundred people were employed there." For decades, he says, developers shunned small towns to build suburban estates: "Towns watched everything around them get developed while they were forgotten. They're not forgotten anymore."

The Kahn-aided rebirth of places like West Chester, Malvern and Downingtown can be laid at the feet of two demographics, he says: empty-nest boomers who no longer need their big McMansions, and millennials, who are allergic to suburban sprawl but gravitate to small towns that have public transportation, good schools (Downingtown's STEM Academy is the top-ranked public high school in the state) and walkability. Build housing for these boomers and millennials, Kahn says, and businesses to serve them will rush in and grow the tax base: "It's all a circle. You have to have people shopping and dining in a town or the town will suffer."

Some of Kahn's work, I mention — Eastside Flats in Malvern, for example — has been criticized for being out of scale amid the small-town charm. "This is what I say to people," he responds, sitting across from me in an Eagles cap and a fitted down vest. (*His beard is grizzled.*) "A hundred years ago, Downingtown looked different. You know the Log House?" It's a local

landmark, a quaint 22-by-25-foot cabin built in 1705 on land once owned by William Penn. “That was the scale then. Over time, the buildings got bigger. I don’t think Downingtown will look a whole lot different in 20 years.”

But the St. John Vianney land along Route 30 will, once his luxury apartments go up there. Has anybody talked to him about the trees? “They brought it to our attention. You get that question a lot,” Kahn says. “You have to talk them down. We’re almost always planting more trees than we take out. We take down the big trees and put in small ones.” He says he likes working with Downingtown’s borough council: “They’re great. They want companies to move in. At the end of the day, they know the development we do is good.”

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**IN 2015**, a German forester named Peter Wohlleben published a book called *The Hidden Life of Trees*. Wohlleben manages a forest in the Eifel mountain range, and the book compiles the lessons he’s gleaned from his decades of work. He writes a lot about interactions among trees:

*If you look at roadside embankments, you might be able to see how trees connect with each other through their root systems. ... Once connected, they have no choice but to exchange nutrients. They create what looks like a social network. ... The reasons are the same as for human communities: there are advantages to working together. A tree is not a forest. ... But together, many trees create an ecosystem ... and in this protected environment, trees can live to be very old.*

Another kind of ecosystem has twined together to try to save Hershey’s trees. There’s Dale, of course, and Adrian and Harrison and Jono and Donna. There’s also Peter Chrisbacher, the network’s historian, who combs through deeds at the county courthouse and pokes around online in search of Hershey lore. There’s Max Paschall, a “city kid from West Philly” who became the Walter Root (no kidding) Endowed Arborist Intern at Morris Arboretum and hooked up with Dale and Adrian after he posted about Hershey’s trees on a fruit-grower group’s Facebook page. There’s Taylor Malone, a graduate of East Tennessee State University, which isn’t far from Hershey’s old TVA stomping grounds. Taylor ran into Buzz Ferver, an old friend of Dale’s, at a joint meeting in Georgia of the North American Fruit Explorers and the Northern Nut Growers Association, groups to which both men belong. There’s Zach Elfers, another self-taught plantsman, who met Dale while working on an organic farm. “He became my mentor,” Zach explains. “And I discovered that I had a

talent for identifying plants in the field. It was like discovering a long-lost love.”

Right now, a few weeks into spring, Zach is in the backseat of Buzz Ferver’s big Nissan pickup, along with Buzz’s 13-year-old son, Bo. (Buzz and Zach have beards. Bo doesn’t. Yet.) I’m riding shotgun, and Buzz is off-roading through an opening in the trees and onto the grounds of St. John Vianney, right where Eli Kahn’s apartments are supposed to rise. Adrian’s not here to protect us, and I’m a little concerned; the home for wayward priests doesn’t exactly welcome visitors. “We’ll be fine as long as we stay in the truck,” Buzz says.

Buzz used to live in Chester County but moved to Vermont when he could no longer bear to see, as he puts it, “colonials, condos and strip malls paving over ... some of the world’s best and most productive soils.” He’s the hub that connects John Hershey’s fans. Buzz doesn’t trust Eli Kahn to leave anything standing; he’s come back to Downingtown to take scions for grafting. Up in Vermont, he’ll replicate Hershey’s No. 1 trees.

“We think Hershey got the contract to plant the grounds when the Archdiocese built St. John Vianney,” Buzz says as we bump through undergrowth. “He planted trees for the Episcopal Church, for the Quakers, the Methodists ... he was crazily prolific. He grew and grew and grew. See that big McAllister hican in the corner? That one’s going to go. They’re adding a lane to Woodbine Road right there.”

“I love that tree,” Zach says.

“There — more hicans in a row,” Buzz says, pointing. “Walnuts. Hickories. They’ll all come down for the new entrance. There’s a red oak. Shagbark hickory ... oh man, I’m dying to jump out and get some nuts.”

Instead, he swings back out onto Woodbine and then back in via a driveway on the other side of the property. “Oh my God,” he says. “They’re digging. There’s a bulldozer sitting right there.”

Later today, he’s meeting up with Taylor, who’s driving here from Tennessee to help him cut scions. Taylor just emailed the gang an article he found online from 1981, when much of the No. 1 Tree-Crops Farm of America got flattened for the Villages at Timberlake. “In the name of progress and the almighty dollar,” the article begins, “one of man’s noble experiments, an alternative to plowed-ground farming, will be uprooted this spring.”

In *Hidden Life*, Peter Wohlleben writes that the groves of old beech trees in his forest “remind me of a herd of elephants. Like the herd, they, too, look after their own, and they help their sick and weak back up onto their feet. They are even reluctant to abandon their dead.” It’s a different way of thinking about trees: as active participants in a landscape, a community holding the soil together, protecting one another, watching while the world changes around them, like Middle-earth’s Ents.

On my first visit to the trees, Adrian Martinez and I clambered across multiple tiers of shopping-center parking lots for a closer look at the McAllister hican. “You can see this landscape isn’t made for people,” he told me. “I don’t know when that happened. You just look up one day and it’s like that.” Last year, he ran for mayor of Downingtown, impelled by a growing sense of urgency. (He lost.) “We have a limited amount of time to get this right,” he said. “It’s just a small borough, but it’s where I live. In the next five years, Downingtown will change more than it has in the past 50 years.”

Eli Kahn looks at this land and sees four-story apartment buildings, parking lots, retaining walls and new young trees — and to him, that’s progress. “Downingtown will become a hipper place,” he says. “Empty nesters and millennials will flock to it.”

That’s not Dale’s version of progress. “A lot of us guys who hang out in the permaculture space,” he says, “we have a different jumping-off place. Capitalist society is finally recognizing that it’s causing great harm to the planet. So you hear ‘Leave no trace’ or ‘Do no harm’ — but we have a different idea. That our lives can be restorative. That our farms can be smaller and kinder. Our culture wants to keep us separate from nature and each other.” Dale wants us all to *connect*, our roots intermingling, winding closer and tighter until we’re as interdependent as trees.

It may sound hopelessly cockeyed and romantic. But Hershey’s acolytes are eminently practical, and patient. They make me think of an Auden poem:

*A well-kempt forest begs Our Lady’s grace;  
Someone is not disgusted, or at least  
Is laying bets upon the human race  
Retaining enough decency to last. ...*

It’s not a bet I would lay.

But tree guys take the long view. John Hershey liked to tell the story of a Tennessee Valley farmer who was jeered by his neighbors for planting nut trees: “When do you think those are going to bear?” “Sooner than the trees you don’t plant,” he shot back.

It’s easy to be depressed about the state of the Earth today, Harrison Rhodes acknowledges. Then he adds, “But when you’re farming, you see how resilient things are. Here’s a funny example. We started grazing cows three years ago at Rising Locust on land that hadn’t been grazed on for 40 years. Within a month, dung beetles” — highly valued by cattle farmers because they feed on feces — “showed up. Within a month! After 40 years! I have no idea where they came from.”

Besides, the tree people are too busy to despair. They’re spreading their message in their own way, slowly, organically. Dale continues to lead groups of pilgrims to Hershey’s trees. Max just gave a talk on them to members of the North American Fruit Explorers. Buzz and Zach are presenting a paper at the Northern Nut Growers Association’s 109th annual meeting in August, and Zach is focused on a survey that will map every extant Hershey honey locust tree. Adrian’s been trying, through the planning commission, to get Eli Kahn to at least plant new Hershey hicans on the ground he clears.

Meantime, other chores await. Taylor is pressing black walnut oil out of nuts he gathered from Hershey’s Tennessee trees. Dale is fermenting his mead; Zach says the pawpaw is even better than the persimmon batch. At Rising Locust Farm, Donna and Jono are planning a class they’ll teach on growing shiitake mushrooms, while Harrison takes customer orders for grass-fed beef and lamb. Buzz has baggies of cuttings to take back to Vermont and graft. Once Bo gets his driver’s license in a few years, Buzz teases, he’ll be able to say: “Son, drive on down to Downingtown and bring me back some scions from that walnut grove at the Villages at Timberlake.”

There’s hope, as long as there’s spring.

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