

Oaks Return to To

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For Auburn fans around the world, few stories could top the state's number one urban forestry project: the transplanting of two, 35-foot-tall live oaks (*Quercus virginiana* Mill.) at the northeast edge of Auburn University's campus, known to the faithful as Toomer's Corner. The four-year, \$900,000 project culminated on Saturday, February 14, 2015, over four chilly hours with the placement of the trees on either side of what is considered the entry way to the campus of "the Loveliest Village on the Plains." Approximately a thousand cheering fans watched as Huntsman Tree Installation swung each oak, in its turn, from the deck of flatbed trailers which had delivered them over 300 miles from their original home in Mead-Westvaco's nursery in Ehrhardt, South Carolina.

Planting began shortly after 8:00 a.m. CDT with the College Street oak first, and then the Magnolia Avenue tree. Tarps were removed from the tops and then from the root ball of each. Limbs were carefully spread to their 30-foot span as the straps were gently removed by hand. A mobile crane cautiously lifted the tree vertically and the trailer pulled from beneath the swinging tree. Slowly the hanging tree was moved over the hole and lowered several times as adjustments were made. Finally the tree was oriented as close to vertical as possible and the last limbs freed of any remaining binding points. Guy wires and soaker hoses were added at a later time to finish the placement.

While installation of the oaks progressed slowly and carefully, much of the work had been accomplished prior to Saturday's planting. Soil contaminated with tebuthiuron, the active ingredient in Spike herbicide, was dug out and carried to a hazardous waste facility. Specialized blocks, called Silva Cells by DeepRoot Green Infrastructure, were used to provide more suitable rooting space for the new trees while giving a platform for stable walkways. Finally, holes were dug larger than the expected root balls, ready to receive the new oaks.

With all this care, it would be a shame to harm the new plantings. The public is therefore asked to delay the traditional "rolling of the trees" until fall of 2016 to allow them to acclimate to their new environment and rebuild their root system. As much as 95 percent of a large tree's root system is lost during the lifting and preparations for moving it.

The planting of the oaks completes Phase I of the redesign for Toomer's Corner. The second phase will involve planting of live oaks, grown from acorns collected from the original Toomer's Oaks, along the walkway leading from the corner to Samford Hall . . . iconic oak progeny leading to Auburn University's most recognized icon.

To date, not a single day has passed without admiring fans walking by, admiring, photographing, and touching the revered oaks. Truly if these great plants hold the spirit of Auburn, then the spirit has roared back to life in these lovely live oaks. 🌳



omer's Corner

