When I tell people that America’s largest and most important stand of American elms thrives in the center of Manhattan, they sometimes look at me like I’m crazy,” says horticulturist Neil Calvanese.

“But in Central Park, there are 2,500 elm trees, of which more than 1,800 are American elms—one of the last remaining perfect stands of American elms anywhere—and the second dominant species of trees in the park, the first being black cherries.” For Calvanese, Director of Horticulture for New York City’s Department of Parks and Recreation, elms are a passion.

“Whether American, English or Chinese—and we do have many varieties in the park—they are a magnificent tree,” says Calvanese. “Their unique arching forms great cathedral-like spaces. They have a wonderful vase shape, pendulous limbs, full branches and their leaves provide beautiful color, not only in the fall, but all year long. They are truly a tree for all seasons.”

Help from private sector

Efforts to keep the elms—as well as the parks 25,000 other large trees—healthy and well puts heavy demands on Calvanese and his staff who care for Central Park’s vulnerable collection of trees.

“During the New York City fiscal crisis 10 years ago, there were only two gardeners maintaining the hundreds of acres that make up Central Park, one of the largest urban green spaces in the world,” says Calvanese.

“Today, thanks to over 20,000 donors who contribute funds each year to the Central Park Conservancy, I have a staff of as many as 45 gardeners who fertilize, seed and mow the meadows, maintain ballfields, weed, mulch, prune, plant and care for our trees.”

The effort to keep Central Park’s elms healthy is also made more difficult by the scourge of Dutch elm disease. “While the disease has decimated the American elm population throughout the country,” says Calvanese, “fortunately, due to close monitoring and careful maintenance, few of our Central Park elms have been lost.”

“Keeping a record

“Also, when a tree needs to be removed due to disease or damage, we need to document the reason for its removal. New Yorkers are very protective of Central Park, and many of them have a favorite tree of trees, and we often hear from them when they discover a tree has been removed. With a Polaroid photo in our file, we can indicate the tree was a hazard due to disease, rot or storm damage. We don’t like to have to take trees down, but when it becomes necessary, at least we can show a tree lover why his or her favorite had to go.”

The big advantage in using instant photos, says Calvanese, is that it makes an on-the-spot record. “There’s no waiting to see if you got the picture you needed. You know instantly, and that’s important when a tree is about to go down and you’re not going to have a second chance to get that photo you need.”

Calvanese is quick to add that park policy calls for replacing—if possible—removed trees with another tree of the same species and, hopefully, of the same size.

Instant photography also helps when buying replacement trees. “Much of my time is spent dealing with commercial nurseries, from whom we buy replacement stock for the park,” says Calvanese. “We will visit a nursery, take a look at their
With instant photography, Neil Calvanese documents tree problems on the
spot. (Photo by Jake Wyman)

inventory, and take instant photos of
those trees we think may be suitable
for purchase.

“The instant photos are brought
back to my office, where they are
reviewed by the Conservancy’s land
scape design office. Once the trees in
the photos have been approved—
their shape, color and size are all
taken into consideration by our
designers prior to purchase and
installation—we issue a purchase
order.”

28 million feet
Approximately 14 million people
walk the park each year. The traffic
makes for a severe soil compaction
problem.

“We continually aerate the soil in
heavy-use areas with a machine that
penetrates three to four inches into
the dirt, breaking it up so that air
and nutrients can get into the ground,
allowing it and the plants it supports
to breathe.”

Calvanese says it is this constant
attention that keeps Central Park
looking as green and beautiful as it
does. “In addition to aeration, the
Conservancy maintains an ongoing
program of fertilizing, overseeding,
irrigation and pruning. You really
have to keep at it all the time. If we
were to discontinue our efforts for
only one year, Central Park would, in
many places, become a dust bowl,
due primarily to its heavy use by the
public.”

However, both public events as
well as special uses for which per-
mits must be obtained—movie
shoots, magazine photo sessions,
construction projects—mean
Calvanese again turns to his instant
camera for help.

“Occasionally, we need to
produce evidence that the condition of
a section of the park was in good order
prior to damage that may have result-
ed from a permitted activity. In the
case of a disagreement, having
instant photos showing ‘before and
after’ conditions can be very help-
ful.”

Calvanese says the birth of the
Central Park Conservancy in 1980
has helped the park to flourish today.
“The Conservancy is a non-profit
organization which works in partner-
ship with the New York City
Department of Parks and Recreation.
During the past 10 years, the
Conservancy has raised $64 million
for the upkeep of the park and has, in
addition, become a national model
for such public and private partner-
ships.”

Calvanese himself has been work-
ing at Central Park for nearly 10
years. “After graduation from The
State University of New York at
Farmingdale with a degree in arbori-
culture, I started my job search. One
day, while unemployed, I visited
Prospect Park in Brooklyn and saw a
Camperdown, or ‘weeping’ elm. The
tree was magnificent. It was at that
moment I said to myself, ‘this is it! I
want to work with trees!’ Not long
after that, I started work as a tree-
climber on the Central Park tree
crew, going up into the trees to do
whatever work was required.”

Calvanese says that 10 years from
now, “I’ll probably be right here.”
Then he turns and looks out his
small Central Park office window at a
grove of majestic elms, their leaves
fluttering in the slight breeze, their
long limbs reaching to the sky.

“But I do see myself in the woods
someday. Doing what? I don’t know.
Probably still helping to make sure
trees grow up strong and healthy.”

—Neil Calvanese
Central Park horticulturist

‘By taking a series of
photos over time, we
gain information on
how tree diseases
spread, and how their
effects vary from one
tree to another.’

By Neil Calvanese
Central Park horticulturist