Members of the 224th Brigade Engineer Battalion, Iowa Army National Guard, broke up downed trees in the Court Avenue District of central Des Moines. The city has increased its $200,000 tree planting budget to combat the Emerald ash borer, an invasive species native to Asia, that has claimed 6,000 of the city's 8,000 public ash trees. A storm last year damaged 3,000 of these trees, which were already in decline due to the borer. The city has vowed to replace them, a process that could take decades to replace.

Trees are stationary superheroes: they lower air temperature in city neighborhoods, reduce heat waves and emissions, and help avoid potentially catastrophic power outages. But despite longstanding and ongoing efforts to plant trees, communities in the United States are not adding to their total number or even maintaining it. Research shows that people's mental and physical health benefits from trees, but they also have liabilities. They drop nuts, seeds and leaves. They buckle sidewalks. They need more money. I know it's so boring to say."

"With marshmallows, you get to build a campfire, too," said Brian Stone Jr., a professor of environmental planning at the Georgia Institute of Technology. "You could have 99 percent mortality and still be in the money 20 years from now on canopy." Mr. Gano said. "I planted a bunch on my property and about 50 percent of them have survived. One of my neighbors bought five or six trees and transplanted them."

"You're trading one risk for another," said David Nowak, a senior scientist with the Forest Service who studies urban trees, acknowledges the risk. Trees close to houses need to be especially well monitored for weakness. But he points out that pipes crack from age, which only then fail. "Sometimes they're so old that you can't even find them," said Mr. Nowak.

Occasionally, their limbs break or they blow over, posing real liability. They drop nuts, seeds and leaves. They buckle sidewalks. They can block storm drains and take out power lines. But the benefits of trees are more acceptably to us."

Incentives can help, but tight budgets often keep them modest. In Louisville, Ky., which threw itself into planting more trees after it was hit by a tornado and a flood, the city was in drought, and abundant water was essential for planting. The city was in drought, and abundant water was essential for planting. On an afternoon that felt too sweltering for June, a 14-year-old girl helped plant that season's 500 trees, transplants with soil mix, buckets filled with water and carried to the dry soil. The city was in drought, and abundant water was essential for planting. On an afternoon that felt too sweltering for June, a 14-year-old girl helped plant that season's 500 trees, transplants with soil mix, buckets filled with water and carried to the dry soil. The city was in drought, and abundant water was essential for planting. 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