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Tree doc snags international award

Tamara Cunningham, Didsbury Review

There are thousands of tree care professionals spanning the globe, but probably none so keen in kindling public awareness as Gerard Fournier. For over 25 years, he's been teaching homeowners how to grow trees and make them thrive in the harsh Alberta climate.

And occasionally, like any strict instructor, he'll give the public a solid slap on the wrist for bad tree practices. Lopping off the tops of hardy giants is the latest in the list of offences homeowners can make.

"People can do this radical tree topping, because they fear the trees will fall or get in the way but they are actually ... killing the tree," Fournier said. "Trees are big solar-powered water pumps and if you take off the leaves they can't get the energy to grow and are invaded by fungi and other species."

The tree doctor often gives advice through tree trivia or Treevia on his website and over radio waves. The community outreach program is one reason why Fournier is considered one of the top arborists in the world.

He and six other arborists were recognized in July as true professionals of arboriculture and leaders in their field by the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA).

Only one other Canadian, Philip van Wassenaer, from Mississauga, Ont. won the award, offered for the first time this year.

The International Society of Arboriculture considers Fournier the top in his field and will use his work as a case study for nearly 30,000 worldwide.

"By recognizing someone like Gerard Fournier and his accomplishments within the community, his actions can be modelled by other arborists as we strive to better our world one tree at a time," said Lauren Lanphear, past president and panel judge for ISA.

Fournier, who owns For Trees in Didsbury, was recognized for several

achievements including his Treevia and student internship program. He also spearheaded an Alberta Arborists Safety committee that successfully lobbied the government to include tree care workers in Workplace Health and Safety legislation and he's the southern tree advisor for the non-profit organization, Tree Canada.

"I was kind of shocked ... you kind of think everyone does what you do, but there are only seven in the world. I felt part of a very elite group," Fournier said of his win.

"It was a humbling experience to receive recognition from my peers. The whole purpose of doing this is to educate the public in something I believe in."

Fournier believes he has an important job in an era when people are concerned about the environment and striving towards sustainability.

There is nothing greener than planting a tree in the backyard. If everyone planted one of the trees, it would do more good in the short term for the environment, than if everyone bought energy-efficient appliances, he said.

"I'm not suggesting we abandon all efforts to clean up our acts and plant a tree, but trees are part of the equation."

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