

An arboretum is a special garden that features trees and shrubs grown for education and research. It may show examples of rare or unique species, or grow native trees. It depends on the purpose chosen for the arboretum.

The 6 acre property on Waterloo St. was first used in the 1940s by Waterloo County to test plowing methods and water runoff for area farmers. The Arboretum, only the second in Ontario, saw its first trees planted in 1957 and 1958. It was deeded to Wilmot Township from Waterloo Region 30 years ago, in 1994.

The area has changed tremendously over the years, with the Arboretum now located within the boundaries of New Hamburg, as seen in the aerial photos.

NEW HAMBURG ARBORETUM TIMELINE

1949 - Site was chosen by the Ontario Department of Agriculture for the first contour plowing match in Ontario.

To 1957 – ongoing soil demonstration plot for the Soils Department of Ontario Agricultural College (Guelph), the Soil and Crop Improvement Association and Waterloo County. The site was managed by Wilf Schneller, a Baden area farmer who was a visionary and an environmentalist, later recognized in the Waterloo County Hall of Fame.

1957-58 – After the project ended, Wilf Schneller and Sandy Forsyth, Agricultural Representative for Waterloo County, suggested an arboretum. Trees were planted, funded by the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests and the Ontario Agricultural College. ongoing soil demonstration plot for the Soils Department of Ontario Agricultural College (Guelph), the Soil and Crop Improvement Association and Waterloo County. The site was managed by Wilf Schneller,

June 10, 1964 – the Waterloo County Arboretum was officially opened by the Honourable W.A. Stewart, Minister of Agriculture for Ontario.

To 1973 – Waterloo County partnered with the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests and the Ontario Department of Agriculture to manage the site. In 1972 there were over 350 trees of 70 species.

1973-1994- The Regional Municipality of Waterloo replaced Waterloo County and had an Arboretum Advisory Committee that included members of Regional council, including the mayor of Wilmot as well as Wilf Schneller (d. 1987).

May 1994 – the Regional Municipality of Waterloo transferred the deed of the “Arboretum Centre – Part 1, Plan 58R-8893, Township of Wilmot” to the Corporation of the Township of Wilmot.

2024 – The New Hamburg Arboretum has been a park belonging to Wilmot Township for 30 years.

Complete history continued on next page....

NEW HAMBURG

ARBORETUM



A History of the New Hamburg Arboretum

It is easy to appreciate the gently sloped, parklike setting of the New Hamburg Arboretum in Wilmot Township. Although many parks in Ontario showcase mature, shade giving native trees, few can be called an arboretum or “tree museum”; even fewer have such an intriguing history.

The New Hamburg Arboretum is located on the north side of Waterloo St., Regional Road 1. The 5.9-acre (2.38 ha.) plot was once part of the Ritz family farm, and in 1947 was located “about a mile east” of New Hamburg on the road then named King’s Highway No. 7B. The short route running through New Hamburg to Baden was transferred by the Province to the County of Waterloo (later, Waterloo Region) after the Highway 7 & 8 bypass was built.

The initial stages of the Arboretum’s development are well described in the 1969 volume of the New Hamburg Tweedsmuir History Book A, one of the collections created by branches of the Women's Institute. The typed report about the “Waterloo County Arboretum” states that planning for the arboretum began in 1956. The original sponsor was the Waterloo County Soil and Crop Improvement Association with assistance from the County of Waterloo (owners of the land), the Ontario Departments of Agriculture and Lands and Forests, and the Ontario Agricultural College.

Why would such a diverse group of agencies partner to create an arboretum? The story of how agricultural land eventually became a municipal park began with a unique set of circumstances, and was spurred by the creative vision of a small number of key individuals. Full of interesting partnerships and negotiations, one early local hero was Wilfred “Wilf” Schneller (1902-1987), a dynamic Baden area farmer who was instrumental in its development and who was involved until his death.

Wilf Schneller took over the operation of his family’s farm, Spruce Grove Farm, near Baden, after graduating from the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph. A creative thinker who was involved in many endeavours, he tested and then implemented grazing and plowing methods that conserve the soil and water. He then promoted his findings throughout southern Ontario by hosting farm tours and demonstrations, some attended by thousands, to teach and encourage others.

Described as a “devoted conservationist” at his induction into the Ontario Agricultural Hall of Fame, Wilf Schneller helped launch the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association, the Waterloo County Federation of Agriculture, and the Baden Chamber of Commerce. He worked for 32 years for Agriculture Canada as a food and vegetable inspector and was president of the Kitchener Musical Society. He also planted over 56 varieties of trees on his own farm.

In 1949, the future arboretum site was chosen for the first contour plowing match for the province, organized by the Ontario Department of Agriculture. Entries were from 4 or 5 of Waterloo County’s junior plowmen who had been successful in regular plowing matches.



The site was arranged with 8 test plots side by side on the gentle 6% slope. At the lower end of the property (nearest Waterloo Street), a catch basin contained a series of tanks, one for each plot. With the strips of land under different types of cultivation, the run-off after a rainfall was measured to indicate the rate of erosion.



Soil & Water Demonstration Project, New Hamburg-1950's

After this experimental beginning, Mr. E. I. McLoughry from the Department of Agriculture persuaded Waterloo County council, the Soil and Crop Improvement Association and the Soils Department of the Ontario Agricultural College to support the site as an ongoing soil demonstration project. This continued until 1957, as future plans for the site were being made.

In an article written for the Waterloo Historical Society Annual Report (v. 60, 1972), Wilf Schneller described his involvement: "As my own farming operations were only a short distance away it was my privilege to manage this project during the ten years that it was operated as a soil demonstration plot. In 1957 the Soils Department of the Ontario Agricultural College decided to continue this type of demonstration on a considerably larger scale on the college farm" located in Guelph.

He continued, "When its usefulness as a County soil conservation project ended, R. A. (Sandy) Forsyth who was then the Agricultural Representative suggested that we should continue with some project which would be of interest not only to the people of Waterloo County but to others as well." It was Forsyth and Wilf Schneller, described as a prominent soil conservationist, who had the inspired idea of an arboretum and, with support from the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests and the Horticultural Department of the Ontario Agricultural College, made plans. The first trees planted, with windbreaks, in October 1957 were followed by specimens in the spring of 1958.

The windbreaks were Carolina poplar and Norway spruce on the western perimeter and Scotch pine and Norway spruce on the east; a cedar hedge edged the southern border along the highway. Most of the native tree stock was supplied by the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests, with additional species coming from the Grand River Commission (now the Grand River Conservation Authority), the Niagara Parks Board, Royal Botanical Gardens and private nurseries.

The trees were purposely overplanted, with the knowledge that weak or diseased trees would be lost, leaving the few strongest trees surviving. However, what wasn't anticipated was that the heavy clay soil in the area made it impossible for some of the non-native species to thrive. This problem was addressed by replacing some of the soil with sandy loam in select areas and maintaining and repairing the existing tile drainage system.

Mice were an issue resolved by a treatment of the time, "removing the grass from around the trees with a chemical", according to Mr. Schneller; rabbits were kept at bay using spiral plastic wrappings, similar to what is done today.

On June 10, 1964, the Honourable W. A. Stewart, Minister of Agriculture for Ontario, officially opened the Waterloo County Arboretum. It became only the second one of its kind in the province, the other being the much larger Dominion Arboretum at the Central Experimental Farm of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada in Ottawa.



A photograph from the opening ceremony shows Minister Stewart among the tiny plantings. Accompanying him is Professor Taylor from the Ontario Agricultural College, who had helped and advised in the arboretum's development.



Aerial view from 1966, the area in green is the Arboretum.

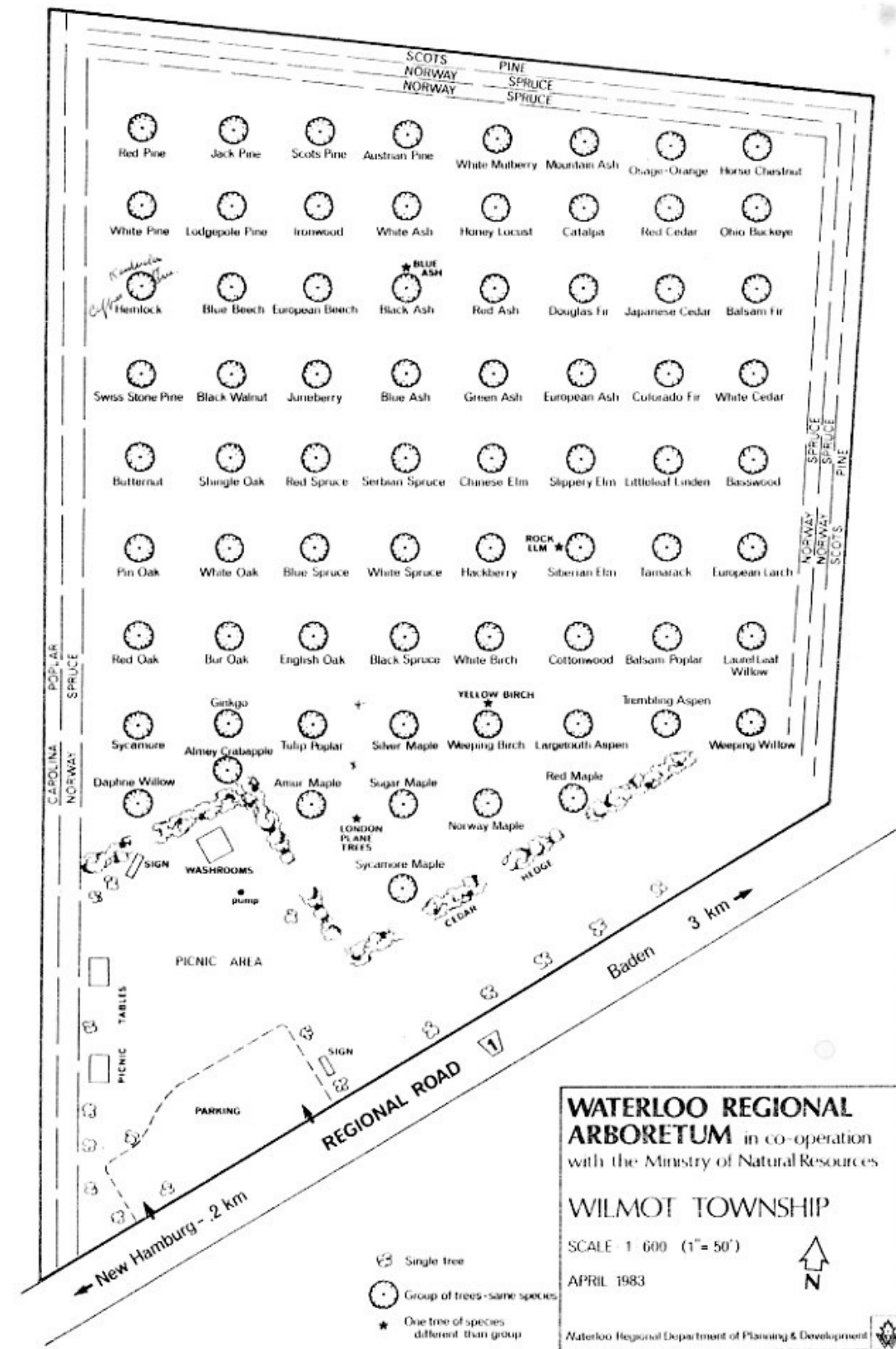
In the early 1970s, Waterloo County's management program for the arboretum had a budget of approximately \$1,000 annually. It continued to be a partnership between Waterloo County, which owned the land, the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests (in 1972, renamed the Ministry of Natural Resources) and the Ontario Department of Agriculture (renamed the Ministry of Agriculture and Food). \$500 was earmarked for maintenance and \$500 for capital costs, which included 50 tree specimens at \$8 each. By 1972, there were over 350 trees of 70 different species at the site.

With the Regional Municipality of Waterloo replacing Waterloo County in 1973, the Arboretum came under the oversight of the Planning and Development Department. An odd placement, but Bill Thomson, the Region's first Commissioner of Planning, took a personal interest in the Arboretum and oversaw its operation.

According to Ralph Shantz, who served as mayor of Wilmot Township for 10 years, serving on Regional council in the 1980's, "You have to give Bill [Thomson] credit, when the Region was formed, the Arboretum didn't fit in with anything. It didn't fit into Engineering or Social Services, so he took it on."

Commissioner Thomson wrote that "Mr. W. Schneller has continued his keen interest in the arboretum and now assists Bill Thomson, The Regional Commissioner of Planning and Development in the planning, operation and maintenance of the arboretum. The Ministry of Natural Resources also assists the Region through their pruning crews, selection and ordering of trees and special managerial assistance to the Commissioner".

In 1983, the Waterloo Regional Arboretum Advisory Committee was formed, consisting of members of the Region of Waterloo council including the mayor of Wilmot Township, plus Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources staff. That year, a scale map of the Arboretum was produced by the Region, showing the planted tree species. (map below)



Wilf Schneller continued to be a member of the Regional Arboretum committee; he was recognized by the Township of Wilmot with a citation for this work, presented to him by Mayor Ralph Shantz in December of 1983.

By 1984, 20 years after the Arboretum's opening, trees were being pruned out along the borders and in the middle of the groupings. The Committee minutes from July of that year show that Bill Thomson "was requested to send a letter to the three hospitals [in the Region] and the March of Dimes indicating to them that we would be interested in donating a tree for their Christmas project if they could make some arrangement in taking them from the site". The trees were estimated to be about 25 feet (7.6 meters) tall. The Christmas tree program supplied trees for at least a couple of years.

The proposed work program for 1984-85 included an impressive list of existing trees mostly in groups of 3 to 5: Kentucky coffee-tree, Butternut, Sycamore, Blue beech, Ironwood, Serviceberry, Tulip tree, White mulberry, Osage orange, Tamarack, Little leaf linden, Trembling aspen, Basswood, Ohio buckeye (Horse chestnut), Honey locust and varieties of oak, willow, maple and cedar. All were rated, and suggestions for additions included Tree of heaven (now considered an invasive alien) and a nut species plot.

Vandalism was a problem, and Mr. Schneller commented that sometimes motorists would drive through the property and hit the trees, causing damage. Trimming or removing parts of the hedge that bordered the front of the property was considered, because it "would help the police give the Arboretum a much more thorough check from the parking area and the road itself relative to vandalism and secondly, it would give a much better visual contact to the passing public."

After Bill Thomson left his position with Waterloo Region in 1985, the Regional Arboretum Committee was reorganized with additional members under the chairmanship of Wilmot Mayor Ralph Shantz. Other members were Lou Hill from Wilmot, Albert Erb, John Irwin (Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources) and the new Regional Commissioner of Planning, Sally Thorsen. Wilf Schneller continued to be a member of the committee, with Regional council appointing him a lifetime member in 1986; he died in 1987.

Though the purpose of an Arboretum would appear to be clear, such has not been the case, as the minutes from August 1986 indicate some soul searching about the goals and mandates. A discussion planned for the next meeting in 1987 was "whether the aim of the Arboretum should be to plant as many species as possible or to maintain what it already has... Do we continue to replace those species which do not grow well in the Arboretum so as to continue to have specimens?"

Former Wilmot mayor Ralph Shantz, who knew Wilf Schneller well, described him as “very knowledgeable and he promoted trees. He was like a bulldog with a bone. To be honest, things sort of fell apart on the committee after Wilf died.”

On May 12, 1994, the Regional Municipality of Waterloo officially transferred the deed to “Arboretum Centre – Part 1, Plan 58R-8893, Township of Wilmot” to the Corporation of the Township of Wilmot. In 2024, this unique cultural heritage landscape celebrates its 30th anniversary with Wilmot Township, something worth recognizing, along with those who had the tenacity as well as a vision for a future full of trees.

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Yvonne Zyma, Patty Clarke, Nick Bogaert
Arboretum Subcommittee, Wilmot HCAC (Heritage and Castle Kilbride Committee)
2024



The Arboretum today.