

EXCLUSIVE

Norfolk developer told feds he bribed Sheriff Bob McCabe as well as Anthony Burfoot, sources say

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## Chesapeake trees are, well, tremendous

Scott Harper  
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Thé N. Pham | The Virginian-Pilot

Gary Williamson, right, and Andy Klatt, second from right, admire a laurel oak tree in Chesapeake that is believed to be about 300 years old. They were photographed Friday, March 1, 201. It measures 25 feet around and 83 feet tall.

### CHESAPEAKE

John Haggerty is accustomed to the attention by now: Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, naturalists, writers, scientists, photographers – all tromping through his living room for a peek in the backyard.

When he swings open the back door and shows off his treasure, the reaction is usually the same: ooohs and ahhs at the giant, gnarled tree towering above them.

No wonder. The tree is a national champion, the largest laurel oak recorded in the United States, as measured by trunk width, tree height and canopy combined. For years it has been on the National Register of Big Trees, a list maintained by the group American Forests.

"A lot of the kids will join hands and try to make a human chain around the trunk," said Haggerty, who has owned the mammoth tree – and the home – for the past 25 years in the Albemarle Acres neighborhood.

"But they rarely make it all the way around."

Chesapeake is home to seven national champions on the register, one of the highest concentrations in the country (Virginia Beach, its closest local rival, has three). Virginia ranks fourth nationally with 77 giant trees, according to the latest roster, which is published twice a year. The next one is expected in April.

The coordinator of the National Big Tree Program, Sheri Shannon, was in town last Friday and had the same reaction when she laid eyes on Haggerty's oak.

"Wow," she said, raising her cellphone to take a photo. "That is impressive."

Fertile soil, mild climate and open spaces are primary reasons why Virginia competes so well with much larger states such as Texas, Florida, Arizona and California for the big-tree crown.

But also, Virginia has two of the most prolific and seasoned big-tree hunters anywhere: Byron Carmean and Gary Williamson, who live in South Hampton Roads.

The duo found, measured and nominated 37 of the state's national champs in the current register. They started scouting old estates, swamps, parks, forests and cemeteries more than two decades ago in Hampton Roads and Western Tidewater, and have discovered plenty here.

Now they go on field trips to other parts of the state – they recently discovered a national champ on actor Robert Duvall's central Virginia farm – and have more recently been traveling into North Carolina and Georgia, always seeking that next behemoth.

On Friday, their mission was to show Shannon some of the trees that she has seen only in pictures or as statistics on entry forms. Shannon, based in Washington, is trying to get out of the office more like this, if only to better appreciate the trees her group recognizes.

"When you go out and see them in person," she said, "it really becomes surreal."



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After the Haggerty home, located in suburbia, the next stop was more country – on the edge of a vacant farm field, off Blackwater Road in southern Chesapeake.

No one was home at the farm house near the field, so the caravan parked and began walking toward a scarred, towering yellow poplar. It was head and shoulders above the others nearby, like a 12-year-old in a kindergarten class photo.

The tree has an ever-growing crack through its trunk, its innards hollow and dark and visible. This is not a good sign, Williamson said, probably the beginning of the end for this giant, which he estimates at 600 years old. Bats and raccoons likely live inside now.

On the back side, the poplar is lined by scars from lightning strikes. But the damage has healed, Williamson pointed out, the bark growing over the scars like nubby scabs.

"She is a dandy," Williamson said, looking more than 100 feet up to the top branches. "Imagine all the hurricanes and storms this has weathered. Amazing."

Last on the Chesapeake tour was a champion willow oak in the front yard of a home off Galbush Road. Williamson and Carmean noticed it when driving around a few years ago.

The willow oak's canopy is immense, spreading across much of the front yard. Dogs have made a worn track around the base of the tree from chasing squirrels around and around the massive trunk.

This is the youngest of the three champions on Friday's tour, Carmean said, probably just 200 years old or so. A drain hole has developed in the trunk, however, sending a long black stain down its front.

If not treated, the drain can lead to rot and premature death. But Williamson asked Shannon if grants are available through her group, American Forests, to help repair beautiful old trees like this one.

"I think so," she said, making a note to herself. "Let me see what I can do."

Driving away, Williamson smiled and began talking about why winter is the best time to go big-tree hunting. It's easier to see deep into forests and swamps where the monsters might be hiding.

He then remembered that a state champion tree – not as big and wide as a national champ – was not too far away and asked if his visitors wanted to stop and see that one, too.

Sure, they replied.

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