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Local Author SOCIAL DIRECTOR FOR THE TREES: MATT RITTER'S NEW GUIDE TO THE URBAN CANOPY

"I want to help people know the trees in their city. Not to just see them as green blobs," explains Potter Valley High graduate Matt Ritter. Ritter is a botany professor at CalPoly and author of the new book "A Californian's Guide to the Trees Among Us."

At a Mendocino Book Company book signing last month, Ritter waved around a fig tree branch and delighted the audience with lurid descriptions of what actually goes on inside a fig before you munch it. He offered, "Sometimes you can find the wings of the wasp still at the opening in the fig, where her wings rubbed off when she entered." That audience will never look at a fig quite the same way. And that's Ritter's intention. He wants to inspire people to first recognize a tree - and then want to find out more about it.

There were several people in the audience who are working on a city street tree list for Ukiah, and Ritter was just in time to proselytize

for more diversity. "That list needs work!" according to Ritter. In fact, he says, all the city tree lists need work. Cities tend to pick the same trees and emphasize manageability rather than diversity, neatness rather than interest, smaller sizes rather than grand shade trees. He pointed to Ukiah's colorful crepe myrtles and acknowledged the pretty splash of color. But they will never make a magnificent tree lined block, relieving the summer heat with shade.

To spice up Ukiah's street tree list, Ritter suggests adding *Tilia tomentosa* (Silver Linden), *Quillaja saponaria* (Soapbark Tree), *Parrotia persica* (Persian Ironwood), and *Taxodium distichum* (Bald Cypress). The current list does include *Tilia Americana*, but none of the others.

Ritter also preaches diversity of size and age. He suggests when a tree starts to fail, replace it. A city block doesn't have to have all same age trees that will all go at the same



Matt Ritter standing in the buttressing root system of a Moreton Bay Fig.

time. He omitted life span figures for trees in his book, believing that those figures are wildly inaccurate. "A

tree lives until someone kills it," he told the crowd.

"What do people say immediately after you mention a beautiful tree, like a magnolia?" The audience anticipated the answer, "But it's so messy." Ritter noted that trees are living things; and people should feel honored to sweep up what they may drop. Pointing to a vase of magnolia blossoms, he explained that they evolved before other flowering plants that depend on bees and butterflies. Magnolias were originally pollinated by beetles. The primitive magnolia blossom is the largest flower among California's cultivated trees, with some blossoms reaching a foot across.

"A Californian's Guide to the Trees Among Us" is small enough to carry around, but still lavishly illustrated with glossy color photographs. The guide starts with the characteristics of the leaves of a tree, then leads you through other clues to

identify the tree.

There are interesting charts: one illustrates the different colors of tree flowers and the time of the year they bloom. With that list, a gardener can create year round color. A pie chart shows the origins of California's urban trees, with one third of the kinds of trees in our urban forest coming from Australia. And of course, there's a family tree for trees.

In Ritter's spirit of bringing trees closer to people, the book is sprinkled with aphorisms. One comes from the Palo Alto Chamber of Commerce, "Trees...are the most therapeutic antidote to a city's architectural problems."

-Annie Esposito

"A Californian's Guide to the Trees Among Us," by Matt Ritter. 153 pages; \$18.95; published by Heydey in Berkeley. Available at the Mendocino Book Company in Ukiah.

