



Staten Island Advance

From curious child to tree savior

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Quite simply, Joseph Docola wanted to understand how the gladiola bulbs would grow into his mother's favorite flowers. So he ripped them up, one-by-one, as his father planted them in their New Dorp yard.

It was his very first lesson in plant science.

Today, IMA-jet, an insecticide developed by Docola -- the curious child now 53 and living in New Hampshire -- is being used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to protect 26,132 of the borough's hardwood trees susceptible to the Asian longhorned beetle.

The agency's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service began tree-trunk injections of IMA-jet on March 31. The treatments will end May 9.

"I am very proud that the product I worked so hard to develop is saving my hometown trees," said Docola, the director of research at Arborjet, a Massachusetts-based manufacturer of treatments to control exotic invasive insects.

There has been no new infestation of the beetle, first discovered in 2007 on Prall's Island and found spreading into residential sections of Mariners Harbor, Graniteville and Travis in the winter, according to Suzanne Bond, an Agriculture spokeswoman.

"It's really important we protect the trees from the beetle," Ms. Bond said. "The goal is to reduce the overall population before it can establish itself elsewhere."

Docola's first contact with the Asian longhorned beetle -- a black, spotted insect, which can grow to an inch-and-a-half and has long, beaded antenna -- came in 1996 while deputy director of landscape management in Brooklyn's Prospect Park.

The Parks Department asked him to help identify a beetle feeding on maple trees in Brooklyn.

"The trees looked like someone turned a shotgun on them," said Docola, a product of PS 41 and New Dorp High School.

He filled out a diagnostic report and sent it to Cornell University, his alma mater, for identification. The culprit was identified as an exotic insect, native to China, which made its way into the United States in wood packing materials.

Docola began experimenting with tree-trunk injection back then, but found the methods too costly.

He soon moved his family to New Hampshire -- "a state where there are more trees than people" -- and was hired by Arborjet to develop an environmentally safer way than soil drench or spraying to treat trees.

"There were times over the years that I have thought I have never worked so hard for so long for so little, but this unexpected project turned it around for me," Docola said.

His company's hand-held tree-trunk injection device -- which Docola described as looking "roughly like a Star Wars blaster" -- has been used by the USDA to combat the Asian longhorned beetle since 2004, but other insecticides were used.

Docola recently learned his IMA-jet formula was contracted for use on Staten Island, where his mother, Maria, still lives.

This weekend he will be visiting her in Eltingville to celebrate her 81st birthday. A few gladiola bulbs might be a welcome gift.

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