

The Ice Storm of 1998!

An interview with Warren Spinner, *Essex Jct. Tree Warden*, and former Burlington Arborist



UVM Green after the storm.

For many of us, the Ice Storm of 1998 left a lasting image of devastation that made Burlington look like a war zone. It is hard to believe that a quarter of a century has passed since then. These days it seems like there are weather-related disasters all over the country and globe that surpass our 1998 Ice Storm. Until then Vermont had always been fairly immune to weather disasters. We could handle a couple of feet of snow, and tornados and hurricanes were rare. This ice storm reminded us that no one is completely safe, and you must be ready. Warren Spinner was the city arborist back then, and shared some of his memories of the event which he described as “the most overwhelming and devastating experience in my professional career!”

When did you know this storm was really serious? The weather reports predicted icing, but we didn’t know how bad it was going to be. We had plans in place to deal with the storm and placed several employees on call if needed. I was contacted by Burlington Police dispatch early that morning stating there were several tree branches down and Riverside Ave. was impassable near Salmon Hole Park. I then called our employees and had no idea that I was about to see the worst tree devastation I would ever experience.

You lived in Essex. How’d you get in? As I approached Burlington, it was like driving into a thunderstorm; with flashes of light all over the city that looked like lightning. It was actually tree branches hitting the primary electric wires causing them to short out. The ice-covered branches glistened as my headlights reflected off them.

What do you remember most about the storm? The sound of branches breaking. First you could hear a branch crack, then a little while later it would break. That was a crash sounding like a huge pane of glass shattering on the floor. It was a very eerie sound. Fortunately, there was little to no wind or else damage would have been a lot worse!

This surely wasn’t Burlington’s first ice storm. What made this one worse than others? It is all about the weather conditions and how much ice accumulated on the branches. The rule of thumb is that branches start to break when there’s a buildup of 0.25 inches of ice or more. When ice buildup is 0.50 inches, it is devastating. We were halfway between that in much of the city. There was a temperature inversion. The upper atmosphere was above freezing, so precipitation fell as rain, but at ground level it was cold, so the rain turned to ice on the trees and other surfaces. It was like an ice rink!



A street in Burlington.

How many staff did you have to help? At that time, we had only two people on the tree crew: me and an Arborist Technician. For the storm we also called upon the assistance of eight Parks maintenance staff. Keep in mind that the branches were coated with a thick layer of ice, so they were much heavier than without ice. I realized there was no way I could do this without heavy equipment, so we enlisted help from the Public Works Dept. to clear the streets.

Was it dangerous? The crew started to clean up trees that had fallen into Riverside Ave. Branches were falling all around us and it became too dangerous to continue working there, I had to say to the crew, “Pick up your tools; we need to leave NOW.” I couldn’t risk the lives of these people.

What parts of the city were damaged most in terms of the trees? Icing was not equal throughout the city. There was less ice and tree damage closer to the lake. As you went up in elevation, there was more ice buildup. The temperature is often 2-3 degrees (F) lower on South Prospect than on Pine Street. The Hill Section sustained heavy damage. Several trees on Summit Street, Mansfield Ave., North and South Prospect Streets were really damaged to name a few. And all around the hospital on Colchester Ave.

Given how widespread the damage was, how did you decide where to begin with the clean up? Everywhere you turned there was damage. There was an Emergency Management Plan for Burlington that identifies the priorities in these cases. The first priority was to keep the roads to the hospital clear and to ensure the hospital has power. The hospital has multiple power line feeds, for these kinds of emergencies, but we had to work to make sure they were all working. The second priority was to keep other main road arteries open, like Main Street, Riverside Avenue, Colchester Ave., North Ave., Pine Street and Shelburne Road.

Next month we will learn about the long-lasting impacts of the storm, both good and bad.