

Fails to measure up

The Red Cedar In A Deland Back Yard Looked Like The Biggest Tree Of Its Kind In The Nation But A Measurement Placed It At No. 2.

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DELAND — Having measured and double-checked his figures, the scholarly judge with the horned-rim glasses takes a pencil from his plastic pocket protector to do the math.

Nearby, the homeowner fidgets, awaiting the verdict.

Is her red cedar the biggest tree in the state? The nation?

Nope.

"This becomes No. 2," authoritatively states Daniel Ward, a University of Florida botanist and tree-sizing specialist. "This becomes the second largest in the country."

Owner Stacia Hollmann's mouth says, "Not bad," but her face flashes disappointment.

The DeLand tree, a Southern red cedar possibly 300 years old, lost on points Friday. The champion tree resides in the town of Archer, near Gainesville.

In a photo finish, the reigning national champion finished a mere 21 points higher than the 262 tallied by Stacia and Mark Hollmanns' behemoth in a kind of tree beauty pageant. The couple hoped the 48-foot-high tree in their back yard would earn them a place in the annals of tree lore.

There's no prize for second. Actually, there's no award for first, either.

For Ward, the Hollmanns and others who prize prime forestry, this is important stuff. That's why the Hollmanns are mildly miffed about a judgment call that denied their claim to the largest tree.

In such matters, trees are measured using a formula calculating the trunk, height and branch volume. The Hollmanns' tree, dubbed "Mr. Livingston," lost points because it is forked.

Instead of measuring the base, where the two trunks merge into one, Ward ruled that only the largest of the forks could be counted. A more liberal approach would have made the Hollmanns' tree No. 1.

"I just don't see how you can measure half a tree," Mark Hollmann said. "I think I have some unresolved questions about their measuring techniques. I want it to get a fair shake."

Ward, who works with the state Division of Forestry and the American Forestry Association to document large lumber, acknowledged that there is room for subjective tinkering in the science of tree measurement. The professor said he only uses the fairest, most conservative approach.

"I've been playing around with trees since I was a little kid," said Ward, who exhaustively explained each of his actions as if lecturing a class.

Perhaps feeding Stacia Hollmann a bit of false hope, the professor launched into a soliloquy on the finer points differentiating the Eastern red cedar from the Southern red cedar. Some experts argue the trees, found throughout the Southeast, are the same.

"Does that mean that ours is a record holder?" Stacia Hollmann asks.

"No, the Archer tree is also a Southern red cedar," Ward said.

Shot back Hollmann: "It was, prior to the big storm."

Good point. Records are lost when trees die, and champions receiving fire, storm or wind damage can lose points along with branches.

Hurricane Andrew destroyed five national champion trees. Robert Simons, a Gainesville forester assisting Ward, said he would check the status of the Archer tree in coming weeks.

Mark Hollmann noted that Simons is credited with having discovered the Archer tree, raising the prospect of needing an independent evaluation.

In this competitive arena, it's rare for a champ to stay on top for long. About a third of the trees turn over each decade, Ward said.

The Hollmanns, it is agreed, are only a chainsaw away from immortality.