

Advice on Arbor Day

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Know what you are getting into when you plant a tree.

It's fine to momentarily give in to romance. Gaze at the gangly thing in its nursery pot and imagine two squirrels racing in a spiral up its fat trunk. Red-checkered cloth spread under its glittering crown. Generous crotch holding a child, who will wave to you in triumph while you fret below.

A sapling outgrows its cuteness. Don't be one of those people who love kittens but hate cats. If you love a tree, love it for the long haul. Give it water, give it mulch, give it protection from wind and rutting deer and rampant snowplows. But first give it space beyond your limited imagination of the heights to which it aspires. Prepare yourself for the time when the tree becomes something out of your reach, too big to wrap your arms around.

Look past the picture on the label twist-tied to its spindly leader limb. Learn more. Learn, for example, that not all maples are created equal. Yes, *Acer negundo Auratum* will quickly (in tree time) fulfill your arboreal summer fantasies. And in autumn its brilliant gold leaves will lie in that low spot of the lawn, a perfect oval of coins spilled from summer's purse.

But steer clear of the Norway, *A. platanoides*. No grass will grow within its drip line, and you will forever picnic on bare dirt.

Even when they appear at their most robust, all maples are top heavy. Most of their energy is focused on creating height and girth and massive limbs. When seriously challenged by storms, their shallow roots are as useful as a decorative plaid skirt circling the base of a Christmas tree. And when they fall, they fall hard, in one grand, sweeping movement, like Jack's giant, shaking the earth, the house, the pennies in your piggybank.

If your tastes run toward the ornamentals, know the facts about redbud (*Cercis canadensis*). Dainty enough to live in the mixed border, tall enough to make a statement, it seems so perfect in every way. So pretty in spring with grape hyacinths clustered around its feet, limbs lined with pink bracelets that give way to summer sleeves of billowy, heart-shaped leaves.

Just as a redbud reaches maturity and stands in the fullness of its beauty, you'll awaken one morning to see its slender trunk split down the middle, slumped over the fiddlehead ferns. *What happened?* you will cry. *There's been no storm! No violent wind!*

What you will learn is that trees live by their own clocks. The redbud self-destructs just when you've decided you can't live without it. A spruce inches along in agonizing slow motion, then shoots up a foot in a season.

And then there are the *Quercus*. The oaks.

Oaks hold onto their gold well past Thanksgiving, long past the time you are cheerful about cleaning up after them. *Get on with it already*, you'll say. *It's cold*. You'll try to will them along, watching them turn the color of honey, then ale, then amber, against a background of naked neighbors that surrender their foliage at a pace more agreeable to you. When they finally let go, you will sigh and stamp your feet against the frozen ground, raking leaves gone stiff and white with frost. Still, you've got to admire such stubbornness.

What you will learn is that a tree can break your heart a hundred different ways. Cherries that won't bear fruit. Birches hollowed out by borers. Over-priced apples that lose their showy grafts and revert back to their plain old ordinary selves.

A tree's roots alone can vex.

Some trees grow roots thick as speed bumps as they age. You won't notice how they've slowly heaved above ground over the years, not until they catch the toe of your boot as you walk to the tool shed, distracted by the cardinal's flash of scarlet or the dog racing off with your glove. For a few irrational moments while you are spread-eagled face down on the ground in pain, confusing the dog with your cursing, you will accuse the tree of malicious intent, of taking some perverse pleasure in its power to trip you up.

Even worse are the roots doing their quiet damage underground. Beware the unquenchable thirst of the weeping willow (*Salix babylonica*). Before you know it, they've wangled their way under the foundation and strangled the sewer pipes.

The roots of the black walnut (*Juglans nigra*) defy analysis. Admire the walnut's deeply furrowed bark, its dark, whorled wood that yields fine cabinets and highboys, the desk where your great grandmother signed valentines. Some day you may even enjoy its fruit, if you have the strength to extract the nuts from their tough shells, and the swiftness to beat out the squirrels. But be aware the roots of black walnuts seep toxins fatal to some of your favorite specimens. They will poison an apple tree outright. They will kill a tomato plant on sight. Why? Are there eons-old dendrological scores that remain to be settled? What bad blood could possibly exist between a tomato and a tree?

Few trees exert this brand of lethal territorialism. Some are merely street smart. You may discover, for example, that locust trees (*Leguminosae*) will tolerate pollution but are highly attuned to dire threat. They smell death in the dry winds of drought, and send out long taproots that sprout distant offspring in inconvenient places. How can you refuse space to something that insistent on survival?

Know that when you ask a tree to put down roots you yourself are saying, *I am here to stay*. Or you are saying, *I may not stay, but I am willing to bequeath whatever survives here to a stranger who will one day sleep in my rooms and plant tulips in my beds and lie beneath wide green canopies I may never see*.

Either way, you are leaving some part of yourself in the ground. Either way, despite your soured romanticism, your powerlessness, your dreams pierced through with disappointment, you are saying *I believe*.