

Think Trees !

The way one thing leads to another, the lighted trees on front lawns and cut trees sparkling through front windows have made me consider trees. Christmas trees have improved mightily over the years. They are picture perfect, limbs rotating around the truck in orderly fashion, the needles clinging dutifully to their branches until mid-January finds them sheltering sleeping perennials.

In my childhood choosing a tree involved the delicate balancing of imperfections. One flat side was permissible only if the tree were to be positioned against a wall or against the sunroom door that was never opened while a foot of snow piled on the terrace outside. Occasionally when a tree was shortened to make room for the topping angel, those bottom branches were wired in to fill gaps.

If you have the space, your family might enjoy planting a group of fir trees to have the fun of cutting your own. If not, consider planting an all-purpose tree now for future grandchildren to climb. Trees really are a long term investment. You know of course to avoid planting the trash trees such as Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*), Norway maple, Paper Mulberry, Leyland Cypress, Bradford pear, willows. Other lovely trees have become so threatened by disease they are a poor choice; Siberian elm, white dogwood, and white-barked birch are subject to fungus and borers. Unless you have a place where the gumballs and litter do not matter, avoid the beautiful Sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*).

Such a lot of negatives! But there are dozens of fine trees that do well here, numerous oaks, maples, birches, elms, horse chestnut, red buckeye, hornbeams, magnolias, black gum and even a fruitless sweet gum, *Liquidambar S. 'Rotundibba'*. We do take trees for granted, knowing little about them unless we are experienced carvers, carpenters or furniture craftsmen. We know trees have bark, even bark that peels attractively, and we recognize how important it is to take care of the bark by limiting encounters with lawnmowers and string trimmers. In studying a cut section of trunk we see heartwood and sapwood but we may not know that the heartwood in an older tree is no longer alive but is essential in supporting the trees' structure. The sapwood is the living part of the tree and it contains the food-delivering phloem and the water and nutrient delivering xylem. The xylem tube system is renewed every year and the old ones form the rings that we count to determine the age of the tree. A fine resolution for 2014: PLANT A TREE.

Another fine resolution is to avoid pesticides whenever possible. Of course they kill bad bugs but they also kill the good and essential bugs and it is doubtful that they are good for people. Don't disparage those bugs. Not only are insects important as pollinators but they also serve as an important food source for animals. Insects, pound for pound, contain more protein than beef. So if you have been invited to try crispy fried crickets don't feel insulted.

To eliminate insects is to eventually create a sterile world where not only no birds sing, but the rest of the ecosystem would be on the way to collapse. A medal-winning book by University of Delaware professor D.W. Tallamy, "Bringing Nature Home", is a blueprint for preserving the natural landscape in which we all flourish.

If you are curious about the connection between your backyard and insects, it rests in the ability of native plants to feed insects. Like some toddlers, insects will not touch some greens. They avoid alien plants like autumn olive and lovely shrubs imported from China and Japan that evolved to feed the insects in those countries. This valuable book will convince you that gardening with native plants is good for the planet – and for you! Outlining the advantages of native plants is preaching to the choir but perhaps you could spread the word?

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