

## **Welcome to September – the month of beginnings**

We acknowledge that January is the month of resolutions and renewed efforts to change the world, but September is equally full of promise. Do not the possibilities seem as endless today as they did to the child who yearned for 64 glorious colors in the yellow box? September means it is time to choose a tree for fall planting.

Do not ask me to explain the math that produced this precise figure but one typical tree that lives for 50 years gives us \$196,250 in ecological benefits such as oxygen, air pollution control, soil fertility, erosion prevention, and recycled water. If conjuring up those figures strikes us as peculiar it is because we have used a very strange method for determining our gross national product.

We count the value of our cheap and plentiful coal as a positive, a plus in our economic life. However we do not deduct the costs incurred by the poisoning of streams when mountaintops are blown off, or the costs of lost wages when huge machines replace minors. Curiously, there are more florists in the US today than miners, even though coal mining flourishes. Let's plant trees!

Since our dwindling fresh water supplies are directly related to deforestation, it is good to know forests act like sponges, absorbing 100,00 gallons of water per acre, compared to the figure for bare soils of 5500 gallons per acre. Don't even think about parking lots!

In searching for a new tree, you may be able to find an old historic gem. A recent study done at Purdue University shows that a new American chestnut hybrid is a viable choice. In testing this hybrid, tree scientists found the chestnut grew faster and absorbed more atmospheric carbon than the five other tested species. One of the saddest consequences of the loss of the American chestnut was the blow to the independent life of the people of Appalachia. Forests of chestnut mast fattened the pigs that had enriched their diets for generations.

There is also a new way to think about biofuels. Rather than use organic wastes, algae, or switch grass for production of biofuel, researchers are saying that it is more efficient to convert them directly to electricity. It offers more reduction in greenhouse gases as well. Somehow, even if few of these scientific experiments become practical, the fact that there are hundreds of them percolating all over the world is exhilarating.

Although most of us have a collection of shopping bags we try to remember to carry into the store so that we do not carry so many plastic bags out, we still seem to gather bundles of the plastic ones. Lots of places are now charging for the use of plastic bags, surely a spur to remember to take in your tote. In China where plastic bags had become an additional environmental bad dream to a country already suffering ecological nightmares, the government has reduced use by two-thirds. The limit in bag production saved China 1.6 million tons of petroleum.

Finally in September we think about lawns. From my perch they look fine after the August rains but if you wish to push good to great, fall is the time to do it. First, have your soil tested. The box and questionnaire along with directions for collecting soil samples are available at your extension office. When Virginia Tech returns your form you will know exactly what should be added to your soil for a perfect lawn.

You will probably save many times the small fee by not having to buy nutrients your lawn does not need. By having left the clipping to decompose after mowing all summer, you have already fed your lawn. Surely you do not want to suffer the guilt associated with using too much fertilizer? We know overuse of nitrogen and phosphorus fertilizers by homeowners contributes to those obnoxious red algae blooms that are fouling our beaches and endangering the underwater habitat for marine life. Area farmers are not wasteful: they are not going to spend money for unneeded fertilizer. Eager for the best lawn in the neighborhood homeowners, encouraged by seductive advertising, tend to think if a little is good, more may be better.