

Tree for
Arbor Day 1999

SOURWOOD FOR ARBOR DAY

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Muddy Waters once sang that the blues had a baby and they called it rock'n'roll. Now that spring-- with its variety of environmental celebrations-- has arrived, I'd like to paraphrase Muddy: Arbor Day had a baby and they called it Earth Day. O.K., so it doesn't have the same ring but you get the idea. Arbor Day was around long before these Johnny-come-latelies like Earth Day or Migratory Bird Day. It's time to give the trees, and a local group that honors them, their due.

J. Sterling Morton, as in Morton Salt and the Morton Arboretum, organized the first Arbor Day in Nebraska in 1872. It wasn't long before the idea caught on across the nation. The exact date of Arbor Day varies from state to state. In Illinois, we celebrate trees on the last Friday in April.

The organization which does an exceptional job of honoring Arbor Day is the Barrington Area Council of Garden Clubs. Currently, seven local Garden Clubs are members of the Council. For over 35 years, the Council of Garden Clubs has donated trees to Barrington elementary schools. Some years they provide seedlings which the kids plant at home. Other years, including this one, they provide a larger tree to each school which is then planted on the school's grounds. The tree the Council has selected for Arbor Day 1999 is sourwood (*Oxydendrum arboreum*).

Never heard of sourwood? You're not alone. Were it not for my forestry degree, I wouldn't have heard of it either. Sourwood, also known as the sorrel tree, is a member of the heath family where it keeps company with broadleaf evergreens such as laurels and rhododendrons. Unlike these evergreen relatives, sourwood is deciduous. In the autumn, as the leaves prepare to fall, they turn a brilliant scarlet which is one of the reasons this is a popular ornamental tree along the East Coast.

In spring, many of our local trees flower first and then open their leaf buds. Sourwood does the opposite, its leaves precede its flowers. The leaves are long (approximately six inches), narrow (one to two inches), finely toothed along the margin, and taper to a point. They are dark green above, pale below and very similar in appearance to the leaves of wild black cherry. Cherry leaves and twigs have a distinctive "burnt almond" smell and taste. Sourwood leaves, as its names suggest, have a sour taste resembling that of the sorrel wildflowers.

In days gone by, the cooling effects of sourwood preparations were thought to reduce fevers. The herbaceous sorrels were also used as medicinal “refrigerants.” In a more practical vein, wayward hunters, lost in the Southern forests, were known to quench their thirst by nibbling on the young shoots of sourwood.

Another of this tree’s common names is lily-of-the-valley-tree. (With a name like that, maybe it should be called the hyphen tree!) One look at its blossoms, which appear in midsummer, and this name makes perfect sense. The sweet-smelling, creamy white flowers look like tiny bells and are arranged in long branching clusters that can be up to eight inches in length. Humans not only like the look and smell of these flowers, they also like to eat them. No, I don’t mean eating the actual blossoms but, rather, the honey made from the flowers. To those who approach honey like fine wine, you will have to travel far to find a better “vintage” than a bottle of sourwood honey.

To find sorrel tree honey, you will have visit the southeastern U.S. In the southern Appalachians sourwood trees can reach a height of 40 to 60 feet. How will it grow here? That’s an interesting question. Its natural range is from southwestern Pennsylvania west to southern Illinois, south to western Louisiana and northern Florida. Sourwood has been grown as far north as Boston but it grows slowly and will not reach the heights mentioned above. It can be difficult to transplant and, like the laurels and rhododendrons, prefers an acid soil. Sourwood has shallow roots so care should be taken not to disturb the soil above the roots. The good news about the sorrel tree is that has few serious pests. The newly-planted tree should be mulched and watered, particularly in its first few seasons, during periods of dry weather.

Due to the nature of its grounds, Hough Street School opted for a shrub instead of a tree. For this school, the Council of Garden Clubs will be donating a serviceberry-- alias juneberry alias shadbush. This member of the rose family does well in ordinary garden soil and in moderate shade. In April, it is covered with a thick layer of white blossoms. I discovered the joys of its berries years ago while working in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. The berries are tasty raw and are also used to make a flavorful jelly. The challenge is getting to the berries before the birds do. Robins and Cedar Waxwings are especially found of serviceberries. I, for one, do not begrudge

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the birds their berries. The only thing better than enjoying a beautiful tree on Arbor day is to enjoy a beautiful tree that is home to colorful birds.

--Mark Spreyer is the Director of the Stillman Nature Center in Barrington, Illinois.