

Arbor Day

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Muskrat Day. Velcro Appreciation Week. Arbor Day. You know it's an obscure event when the greeting-card trade hasn't bothered to capitalize on it. While not the best-known celebration, Arbor Day has a respectable history, as well as a local connection.

Rooted in northern New York State, Arbor Day, observed on the last Friday in April, is now recognized around the world. J. Sterling Morton of Adams, NY germinated the concept in 1872 to highlight the need to conserve topsoil and increase timber availability. Morton's son went on to found the Morton Arboretum in Illinois, and Arbor Day went on to become a somewhat obscure, if virtuous, tradition.

Not only was J. Sterling passionate about planting trees, for him the act was sacred. He said "The cultivation of trees is the cultivation of the good, the beautiful and the ennobling in mankind," and believed every tree planted made our nation a little better. I tend to agree with his lofty pronouncement. To plant a tree is to invest in the future, and is an act of generosity. When we add a tree to our community, it's likely that many generations of people after our passing will enjoy it.

Trees enrich our lives in surprising ways. Many of us are aware trees decrease home energy costs, increase property values, filter pollutants, store carbon and all that goody-gum-tree stuff. But few know that shoppers spend more money when there are trees in a downtown shopping district, and that homes sell faster on tree-lined streets. Crime rates drop when urban neighbourhoods are planted with trees. And lying under a tree in summer cures acne. OK, I made that last one up, but the rest is true.

It may be noble to plant a tree, but it has to be done right or you may as well rent the thing. A poorly planted tree will live but a fraction of its potential lifespan. Location is the first consideration. Kids and trees look cute when they come home from the nursery, but they grow up fast and often take up more room than expected. If a site is under wires or has restricted space for branches or roots, the right species and variety is needed that can reach full-size without causing conflicts.

The old adage "dig a fifty-dollar hole for a five-dollar tree" may need to be adjusted for inflation but the idea still has currency. Ninety percent of tree roots are in the top top 25 centimetres (10 inches) of soil. To reflect this fact, the planting hole should be saucer-shaped and 2-3 times the diameter of the root system, but no deeper—ever, or the Planting Police will ticket you. OK that's fiction too, but if an arborist happens to come along they may scowl ominously.

It's imperative the trunk flare be at ground level, because deep planting leads to serious future health problems. For the tree, mainly. Here's an arborist joke: What do you call a metre-deep planting hole for a tree? Its grave.

Before backfilling, remove all burlap and twine. Wire cages on B&B trees should be cut away or stomped to the bottom of the hole. Container-grown root systems may have circling roots that should be teased out straight—this may require vertical cuts into the root ball.

Adding loads of organic matter to the backfill likely dates back to ancient times, when folks might grab an arborist, if one was handy, and throw them in the planting hole. Possibly in response to this, arborists now recommend little or no additional organic matter in many cases.

With extreme sandy or clayey soils, peat moss, compost or other amendments can be mixed in the backfill up to 30% by volume. More can cause a "teacup effect," leading to root suffocation. Fertilizer is stressful on transplants, so wait at least a year on that. In healthy native soils, trees may never need

commercial fertilizer.

Water as you backfill, and prod the soil with a stick to remove large air pockets. Unless the site is very windy it's best not to stake the tree—movement is needed for strong trunk development. Mulch 5-10 cm over the planting area (not touching the trunk) to help conserve moisture, suppress weeds, and improve the soil.

It's nearly impossible to over-water a new transplant, but it does happen. Throughout the first season, check the soil every few days to be sure it's moist but not waterlogged.

Given our long winters, it is good to consider trees with aesthetic interest outside the growing season. Here are some cold-hardy suggestions:

- ♣ Hawthorns are salt-tolerant native trees maturing at around 7 metres, good for under utility wires. 'Winter King' has copious persistent fruit that look great in winter & provide bird food.
- ♣ River birch are medium-large trees with attractive and unusual pinkish-white exfoliating bark. 'Heritage' is resistant to many pests and diseases.
- ♣ Kentucky coffeetrees are tall & drought-tolerant, with few pests & diseases. Their coarse-textured branches produce a striking winter effect—they deserve to be more widely planted.
- ♣ For spacious sites, our native bur oak has twisting branches with corky wings; interesting in all seasons. A bur oak silhouette in winter is breathtaking. Especially if it's real cold. These massive trees tolerate both drought & intermittent flooding, & can live hundreds of years.

Happy Arbor Day – planting a tree is a wonderful activity to share with loved ones, and a great investment in the future. Tree Canada offers excellent information on tree selection and planting at:

<https://treecanada.ca/resources/canadian-urban-forest-compendium/8-species-selection-and-planting/>

Paul Hetzler has been a Certified Arborist with the International Society of Arboriculture since 1996, and is a member of ISA-Ontario, NYS Arborists, the Canadian Society of Environmental Biologists, the Canadian Institute of Forestry, and the Society of American Foresters.