

Arbor Day: Trees for Today and Tomorrow

By Peter Barber

The importance of trees became obvious to all by the end of the 19th century. Nearly every tree east of the Mississippi River had been harvested and the land cleared to make room for agriculture and rapidly expanding communities. Severe erosion and shortages in timber for construction and fuel threatened the prosperity of the nation, and in response, Theodore Roosevelt created the Forest Service. Well before this, people who lived in eastern towns knew the value of trees, especially trees within city limits. The planting of American elms was encouraged, and city streets were lined with these majestic trees. As settlers and pioneers moved westward, they brought with them the idea of planting trees for shade, fuel, and protection from wind. One of these settlers was J. Sterling Morton.

In 1854, Morton moved from Detroit, Michigan, to the Nebraska Territory. Upon arrival, Morton was struck by the lack of trees on the Nebraska

plain, and he immediately set about planting trees and other plants on his property. Morton became the editor of the territory's only newspaper, which provided him a captive audience to stress the importance of planting trees for conservation. The people took his ideas to heart, and his popularity led him to become the Secretary of the Nebraska Territory. This position gave his ideas even more weight, and one of those ideas was Arbor Day.

The first ever Arbor Day event took place on April 10, 1872. It was estimated that one million trees were planted during this celebration, which included a large parade, and a speech by Morton himself. A critical part of this huge success story is the involvement of schoolchildren; every child was to plant a seedling, or

seed, and prizes were awarded to individuals and counties who planted the most. By 1882, schoolchildren all over the country were planting trees in observance of Arbor Day. The Nebraska state legislature officially adopted Arbor Day as a state holiday in 1885, and it was held on April 22 thereafter, the birthday of J. Sterling Morton, in honor of his conservation efforts.

Kentucky adopted Arbor Day as an official state holiday in 1887. April 2 was the date chosen then, although it has changed and is now celebrated the first Friday in April. Again, schoolchildren were a key component to the success of these early Arbor Day tree planting events.

The catastrophic loss of the majestic American elms due to Dutch elm disease, and the near total loss of the American chestnut due to chestnut blight, highlighted the importance of trees for conservation. Today, Morton's ideas have been greatly expanded, due to research in the fields of forestry, arboriculture, and soil conservation.

Urban forestry is the science that pulls these other sciences together and applies them to the management of trees in our communities. New, modern-day standards were developed for tree planting and all tree care activities, which introduced even more ideas for tree conservation. The concept of planting the "right tree in the right place" is a mantra for urban foresters and arborists across the world.

What can you do to help with the conservation of trees in your community? The easiest way is to attend your local Arbor Day celebration. In Kentucky, local conservation districts and the Division of Forestry provide trees and educational materials on everything related to trees.



J. Sterling Morton

Photo courtesy:
Arbor Day
Foundation website,
www.arborday.org



**University of Kentucky's
Arbor Day celebration in 1890.**

Photo courtesy: University of Kentucky General
Photographic Prints Collection

Trees provide food, shelter, and homes for many types of wildlife*.

Tree roots help to stabilize the soil and increase infiltration of water into the soil which reduces erosion and flooding.*



One acre of forest absorbs six tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and puts out four tons of oxygen (O₂). This is enough to meet the annual needs of 18 people.*

Of course, tree planting events are still the main attraction, and many of these take place across Kentucky, some of which see several hundred volunteers planting thousands of seedlings. Children are still heavily involved with these activities, just as in the old days. Schoolchildren in Kentucky and all over the country can also participate in a poster contest for Arbor Day, and the winners of this contest receive everything from a cash prize, formal recognition, and a tree planted in their honor at the National Arbor Day Farm in Nebraska.



University of Kentucky's Arbor Day celebration in 1915.
Photo courtesy: University of Kentucky General Photographic Prints Collection

Another great way to get involved is to encourage your community to become a Tree City USA. This nationwide program, created by the Arbor Day Foundation, recognizes communities that meet basic standards for managing their urban forest. These communities provide opportunities for citizen involvement through an official tree board or urban forestry department, which sponsors educational events along with the annual Arbor Day celebration. Learn about other ways to celebrate

Trees around your home can increase its value up to 15% or more.*

Arbor Day by visiting the National Arbor Day Web site at www.arborday.org, or contact your local forestry office or tree board. There is no greater good than planting a tree, so plan to do your

part. Take care of the trees on your property, become involved in Arbor Day events, and remember J. Sterling Morton's motto: "The cultivation of trees is the cultivation of the good, the beautiful, and the ennobling of man".

** More information about the value of trees in your community can be found at www.arborday.org/trees/benefits.cfm*

Shade trees properly placed around buildings can reduce air conditioning needs by 30 percent and can save 20 - 50 percent in energy used for heating.*

About the Author: _____
Peter Barber is the Partnership Coordinator in the Urban and Community Forestry Program with the Kentucky Division of Forestry.
Kentucky Division of Forestry, 627 Comanche Trail, Frankfort, KY 40601;
E-mail: peter.barber@ky.gov; Phone: 502.564.4496; Fax: 502.564.6553.

"To exist as a nation, to prosper as a state, and to live as a people, we must have trees."
— Theodore Roosevelt