

Plant Lovers Almanac

For: August 23, 2014

Jim Chatfield

Ohio State University Extension

Though it seems too soon for school to start up again this week, the seasons of plants remind us that the end of summer is truly coming, including my personal harbinger of autumn – the coming of the salmon-colored Joe-Pye weed and electric purple ironweed flowers that grace local parks and byways. Our extended season continues with both sides now of ups and downs, from cool weather and green lawns, to flooding waters this summer.

Every season brings surprises and last Friday David Wiesenberg of the Wooster Book Company demonstrated this to photographer Stephen Tomasko and myself on a short afternoon trip to the Cleveland Lakefront Nature Preserve. David was introduced to this quite delightful site within lakeview of downtown Cleveland by retired OSU plant pathologist Randy Rowe, as birders both they came for the tweets. Last Friday we enjoyed the almost tame blue herons and the sound track of numerous birds, but also the grasslands, pathways enjoyed by families, the butterflies, and also the perspectives.

As their website indicates, this “88-acre man-made peninsula” and its 1.75 mile Perimeter Loop Trail offers excellent shoreline views back west to downtown Cleveland. Its origins are from river dredgings and sediment placed within dike walls by the Army Corps of Engineers from 1979 to 1999, and as the website indicates, since then “Nature has taken its course.” The trails opened in 2012. It is very cool that this site is so close to industrial areas and downtown Cleveland and is yet so calming and, though invasive species abound, they are the first colonizers and are performing quite the environmental services. Life matters.

Which brings us to the last item for today’s *Almanac*. There was a good bit of buzz recently about a tree-saving effort in Ann Arbor, Michigan where a “hundreds of year’s old” bur oak, 44 inches in diameter, was being relocated as part of a \$135 million project to build a new building in the Ross School of Business complex. Concerned with the issue of removal of this living legacy of the past, over 300 Wolverines petitioned to have the tree relocated. The principal donor of the project (to the tune of \$100 million) is Stephen Ross, the owner of the Miami Dolphins, who responded by providing funds for the cost of \$400,000 to relocate the oak. As we can all imagine, it is no easy task to remove and relocate a tree and root ball weighing 700,000 pounds or so.

Certainly this is an inspiring story in terms of people caring about this large, living time-tested tree. I jumped into this story, though, with our OSU Tree Campus Columbus committee, which actually got jump-started years ago with a somewhat similar situation with historic (predating OSU’s founding; along the Underground Railroad route) sycamores on campus slated for removal by construction of a temporary road on campus. The save the sycamore campaign helped energize our renewed tree culture on the OSU campus. So, I do agree with OSU tree guru Dr. Dan Sturve who indicated that such trees are “masterpieces of Nature”.

I get the power of this idea. Nevertheless, I pose the question: “Is this the best use of \$400,000?”

Granted, there is great value in mature, large-canopy trees. We are becoming more and more aware of the benefits of trees. These include environmental benefits:

According to the well- researched i-Tree model, a 44 inch diameter bur oak next to a building in Ann Arbor provides annual environmental services of \$338 in terms of stormwater remediation, energy savings, air quality benefits, carbon sequestration, and aesthetic benefits (itreetools.org, treebenefits.com). i-Tree was developed from a public-private partnership of the United States Forest Service, the International Society of Arboriculture, the Arbor Day Foundation and Davey Tree Expert Co. of Kent, Ohio.

There is also emerging knowledge of the significant social and the health benefits of trees, and of course, in this case it is quite obvious that many people in Ann Arbor attach great meaning to this particular tree.

However, in the tradition of the Arbo-Charettes (freewheeling convocations of multiple perspectives) we hold at OSU, consider that urban forests and tree campuses are typically underfunded relative to their importance. Also, skipping to a different conservation strategy, consider that one of the programs for wetland mitigation in the United States is that if developers build on a wetland site, they must provide economic resources to restore wetlands elsewhere.

How about a tree-land mitigation program that would provide for building projects a significant allocation of resources for tree planting and care elsewhere in an urban forest or tree campus? Perhaps every time a tree was removed for a building project the value of mitigation, though not the \$400,000 for this bur oak relocation, but perhaps a value assessment at least along the lines of the i-Tree values of the tree(s) removed, perhaps multiplied by the years accumulated and projected for the life of the tree(s).

It is also important for this case study to consider that trees, as much as we love them, do have a finite life, and the relocation prospects for survival and comparable health are far from certain. As inspiring as the efforts at the University of Michigan are to save this bur oak, is it not worth considering that these efforts would be more sustainable if followed up by or re-directed toward such a treeland mitigation program that would finally result in proper resource allocation to urban forests and tree campuses?

It is obvious that the University of Michigan has a number of Loraxes inspired to stand up and speak for this tree. In the long run, the deeper issue is growing our understanding of how trees matter so that monetary and human resources to sustain healthy urban and campus forests are provided on campuses nationwide every day of the year.

Maize and blue. Scarlet and gray. Green.