

Plant Lover's Almanac

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Our wild ride this Spring now turns decidedly bucolic with day after day of warm sun. Finally fading are the golden yellows of forsythia, that despite several drops into the teens remained sunny, at least from afar, for weeks, even after being covered with stocking caps of snow. The early star magnolias had a few days of glory, then were zapped, but the Little Girl hybrids were only slightly bruised and yellow magnolias and sweetbay magnolias were not affected with blooms yet to come.



Forsythia and one of our recent northeast Ohio spring snows (JC)



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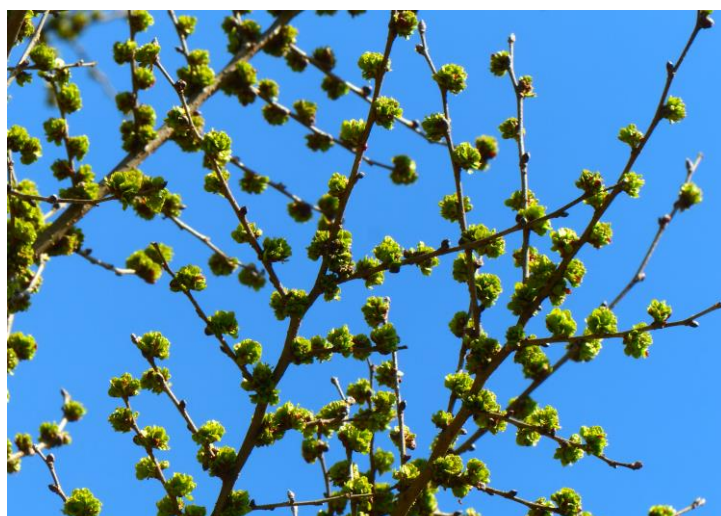
Serviceberries

are about to open as are crabapples, with the peak bloom at OSU's Secret Arboretum in Wooster probably next weekend. Alas, such winter and early spring features as the look of the bare river birch twiggy and catkin show against the crisp blue sky and the fat buds of elm trees are fading into the new season, but with what is to come, how can we not rejoice. Let us take an inside look at a tale of two trees due soon for Arbor Day plantings.

College of Wooster Arbor Day tree: The Regal Prince™ oak. This tree, to be planted at an April 29 planting honoring the Service Center Department is a hybrid oak, a cross between an upright English oak, *Quercus rober* 'Fastigiata' and the swamp white oak, *Quercus bicolor*. Its patented cultivar name is 'Long'. What's up with all these names? Let us digress.

First of all, if trees read books instead of made them, then species should not hybridize. The idea of a biological species (denoted by the two-part Latin name, the Latin binomial) is that it is reproductively isolated from another species, in short the sperm nucleus of one should not cross with the ovules of the other. Thus *Quercus rober* and *Quercus bicolor* should not mate. But on occasion, they do. Oaks are particularly notorious for this, and are even said by otherwise straight-laced botanists to be "promiscuous".

As it turns out, there are some limits to this, and oaks are divided into the white oak group and the red oak group. Only those species in the white oak group will



New buds burst forth on the red elm on the College of Wooster campus (JC)

interbreed and only those in the red oak group will interbreed. English oaks and swamp white oaks, unsurprisingly, are in the white oak group (identified by rounded leaf lobes) and, as indicated, these oaks sometimes color outside the lines of a well-behaving biological species. Or as Glenn Keator in the book “The Life of An Oak” puts it:



River birch finery and a robin welcoming the change of the seasons (JC)

“Today’s classification system, with its precise rules for naming, attempts to reflect the relationships between plants and their evolution. As the system is refined with every addition of new knowledge, we hope to perfect our own view of the natural world. We need to remember, though, that we are the ones imposing order on an inherently chaotic system. Nature seldom draws sharp boundaries around her creations, as anyone who has wrestled with the intricacies of oak classification readily acknowledges.”

So, with the help largely of wind pollination rather than the birds and the bees and the “promiscuity” of these two species of oaks, we got a new plant. This was noticed by horticulturists and then propagated asexually, cloned to make identical plants and patented under the cultivated variety of ‘Long’ so that arboreta and urban foresters know exactly what they are buying and planting.

So, for the main event, let us denote the features of this hybrid oak, which after all, is why Beau Mastrine, the College of Wooster grounds superintendent extraordinaire and his staff chose this tree. It is columnar (that is what ‘Fasitigiata’ from the English oak parent means) and at maturity will be 40-60 feet tall and only 20 feet wide. It has the two-toned leaves, glossy green above and pale white below, leaves of the swamp oak parent. It is touted to have excellent powdery mildew resistance, important as English oaks in general are notorious for powdery mildew. It has dense foliage and does well as a screen or as a specimen tree standing alone. It has a good range of tolerance to variable soil conditions. Plant in full sun. It is an excellent Arbor Day selection.

Since we are channelling the British Isles today, let us turn to the Monty Python troupe to say: “And now for something entirely different.” Let us look at the...



Kenny Cochran and Beau Mastrine at the College of Wooster (JC)

Arbor Day Tree at Secrest Arboretum: ‘Morton Circle’ London Plane Tree. This tree will be dedicated at OSU’s Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center’s Shisler Center following an all-day Tree City USA celebration that begins at 9 am. This selection also reveals the story of a tree in a new translation. The story of the London planetree begins according to most authorities in the 17th century in London’s Vauxhall Gardens. There planetrees from around the world were planted and appreciated for their grand stature and mottled bark. One species, from North America was the American planetree, most commonly known to us as sycamore, that has the Latin binomial of *Platanus occidentalis*.

Another species, the Oriental planetree, *Platanus orientalis*, was planted nearby, and once again, these became kissing cousins, and one day, horticulturists realized that these two species, again flouting the rules, mated, and the London planetree hybrid, classified as *Platanus x acerifolia* was born. It is so popular in London that at times the population of this tree on London streets approaches 50%. This is of course, not quite cricket as such monoculture-like lack of planning is as vulnerable to an emerging exotic pest or disease, as is lining American streets with elms or ashes.



Magnolia before the deluge framed in a window at the College of Wooster (JC)

But we double digress. Back to the present. Secret's tree will be a newer version of London planetree, so to speak, propagated by Morton Arboretum's George Ware by deliberately crossing an American planetree and an oriental planetree, blending nurture to match Mother Nature. It is patented as the cultivated variety 'Morton Circle' and trademarked as the redundantly named Exclamation!™.

As with other London planetree hybrids this cross will have less anthracnose disease than our native sycamore and this selection is also touted as having less susceptibility to powdery mildew. It has an upright-pyramidal habit, growing to a spreading 60 foot by 30 foot stature and as such a big canopy tree will provide high levels of environmental services for energy, air quality, and stormwater remediation if planted properly. It shows excellent tolerance to a variety of soils and should be planted in full sun and with room to grow and not too near buildings, - true for all large trees.



TREE CITY USA®

About that Tree City USA celebration. This program salutes the City of Wooster for being one of only sixteen cities nationwide that were original Tree City communities, one of three in Ohio, along with Westerville and Springfield. Quite a tradition. Former Secret Arboretum Director Ken Cochran will speak for the trees at 9:30 and at 2:30 current Director Joe Cochran will plant the planetree and eloquently recite the perfect tree poem of John Updike "Planting Trees." *Our last connection to the mythic...*

Well, to hear the entire recitation, you will have to come to Secret. To close, enjoy this great gift of wondrous weather as spring truly bursts forth. Try not to mourn the blackening of the early magnolias and focus on the flowers and foliage just now unfolding. Arbor Day, Arbor Week, Arbor Month, and the Year of Trees is arriving.