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Some of the benefits of trees

Bob Beyfuss, an educator with Cornell Cooperative Extension in Greene County, has always considered trees as a higher form of life despite the fact that they cannot think or move. He says, "Tree do not bleed blood per se but many will leak sap when wounded. They cannot outthink you or outrun you but most will outlive you regardless."

Although they have no nervous system or mobility, trees have managed to move around the planet pretty well. Consider apple trees for a moment. Today apple trees grow everywhere in the entire world except the tropics. This is despite the fact that every single one of them can be traced to a tiny area in central Asia called Uzbekistan. It is true that there were crabapples present on this continent when the settlers arrived but crab apples are a far cry from the sweet apples we consume today. So did humans take advantage of the good tasting fruit of apple trees or did apple trees use humans to spread their species throughout the world?

Coconut palms figured out a way to float their seeds across the oceans long before humans had rafts. Trees domesticated animals like birds and deer to move their progeny around eons before humans thought about domesticating any sort of animal.

Beyfuss says, “Trees provide people with firewood to keep warm, building materials to make stuff, tools to make even more stuff, shade for my ginseng plants to grow, food and cover for the critters I like to watch, shapes and forms to amuse my mind and fuel my imagination, oxygen to breathe, tasty fruit and nuts to eat. Even dead trees provide me with yummy mushrooms and the roots of living trees provide even more mushrooms for me to eat! My favorite wild mushroom the chanterelle can only grow in association with the roots of trees. The same is true for truffles and a whole host of other fungi.”

Willow bark gave us aspirin and the inner bark from a Pacific Yew tree yields the cancer medicine that we call Taxol. Who knows what other tree borne medicines are waiting to be discovered in the Amazon or maybe even in one of New York’s 57 counties? I thank trees for the cork in my wine bottle and the oak chips that flavor my chardonnay. Violins and guitars would not sound quite like they do without the resonance of spruce wood. It is true that you can grill food over bottled gas but it tastes much better if you use charcoal. Trees very effectively sequester the carbon dioxide we put in the atmosphere when we burn oil and other fossil fuels. They muffle highway noises, filter smog from the air, trap dust and dirt on their leaves, hold the ground in place when it floods and delight our senses in ways I cannot begin to describe.

Is there any sight more beautiful than the view of a New York forest in early October? So, get outside, learn to identify trees in your woodlot or in your community, and find out what many wonderful and different products and values trees provide society.

For additional information on forestland activities that will benefit your objectives, visit Cornell’s forestry website at www.ForestConnect.info, contact your local office of Cornell University Cooperative Extension, or contact the New York Forest Owners Association through their website at www.nyfoa.org

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Editors note: This article is the first in a 15 part series that is provided through a joint initiative of Cornell University Cooperative Extension and the New York Forest Owners Association as an educational service that helps the citizen of New York enjoy, use, and sustain private rural lands. For more information on these and other topics, please contact your local office of Cornell Cooperative Extension or visit www.ForestConnect.info or www.NYFOA.org