

ETF News

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NEWSLETTER OF THE EUGENE TREE FOUNDATION

Cottonwoods Add Fragrance to Springtime

by Whitey Lueck

One of the most pleasant scents in the tree world comes not from the tree's flowers, but from its aromatic leaves. Along local rivers, the fragrance of emerging cottonwood foliage is particularly striking. A whiff of it tells us that winter is truly over and spring is on its way.

Already in late February some years, the winter bud scales begin to fall from high in the cottonwoods. The scales have protected the cottonwood's flower buds as well as its vegetative or leaf buds from winter cold; both bud types were formed the previous year and then overwintered inside their sticky protective covers.

The first buds to open are the flower buds. Cottonwoods—like other members of the willow family (*Salicaceae*) such as aspen—bear their flowers in elongated clusters called catkins and are dioecious (dye-EE-shuss). That is, male and female flowers are borne on separate trees. And because they are pollinated by wind rather than by insects,

the “male” trees produce prodigious amounts of pollen. Depending on the weather, this pollen can be released over an extended period or during a fairly short time. If it is the latter, some human residents here in the upper Willamette Valley may experience an allergic reaction to the pollen. But as soon as rainy weather returns, as it usually does in March, the pollen count quickly goes down again.

As March advances, then, the cottonwoods conclude their flowering and begin to leaf out. That's when the real olfactory extravaganza begins. The leaves, like the bud scales themselves, are coated with a sticky substance that is very fragrant. In fact, in the journals of early pioneers in our area, cottonwoods are called “Balm of Gilead” trees, a biblical reference to a completely unrelated tree with similar “restorative” and fragrant properties that grows in the Middle East. To this day, some people—especially older and more

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Fluttering cottonwood leaves exposing their silvery undersides are always a pleasing sight.



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President's Column



snow, ice, wind, and plenty of rain.

Many of you, I'm sure, are especially delighted this year with the arrival of spring, coming as it does on the heels of a rich and varied winter with

But the weather didn't keep our Board from being busy! As you know by now—especially if you attended our Celebration of Trees in early February—we have secured a \$5,000 grant from the Phileo Foundation. This grant is very timely since it will help us launch a search for our really needed executive assistant.

Our Financial Committee also worked very hard to secure two other grants, but without success. This did not, however, dampen the enthusiasm of volunteers and Board members who were involved with planting trees! By starting our plantings this season earlier than usual, we were able to

plant more trees than ever, leading up to the Arbor Day planting on April 12th which was the Grand Finale of the 2007/08 season. For that planting, concrete was removed once again to make room for more trees! It doesn't get any better than that for our "one-legged" friends.

So I want to wish everyone a warm welcome to Spring 2008! And thank you for the support you have given us over the years.

Stay tuned!

Alby Thoumsin, President

Several Small-Canopy Trees that Merit Attention

I am frequently asked what to plant in small spaces—whether there is a lack of space vertically or horizontally—and I always enjoy suggesting trees that most people don't yet know. The following "candidates" are all hardy in our area and can tolerate most soil conditions.

The first one is the **water birch** (*Betula occidentalis*)—not to be confused with the river birch (*B. nigra*). The water birch and paper birch (*B. papyrifera*) are the only birches native to Oregon. Water birch grows naturally along streams from central Oregon to the Rocky Mountains and south to Arizona. It has dark reddish-brown bark that doesn't peel, and it grows naturally as a multi-trunked tree. Its modest dimensions (18 to 20 feet in height) make it a good candidate for small yards, and it could also be planted under power lines. The multiple trunks and twiggy canopy provide great habitat for birds who also take advantage of the tree's seeds when they mature in early fall.

My next champion is the **upright European aspen** (*Populus tremula* 'Erecta'). This tree is the European counterpart of our well-known quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*). Both trees have the reputation of having "trembling" foliage as soon as the smallest breeze comes along—hence their sci-

entific names—but the main difference between these cousins is their size, especially with the 'Erecta' cultivar. While the quaking aspen can reach 75 feet and sometimes even more, the European aspen will peak at 40 feet. The cultivar 'Erecta' was selected because of its especially narrow form, with a canopy width that doesn't exceed more than eight to ten feet at maturity.

The European aspen leaf is similar to that of our native aspen, but the teeth are more prominent and fewer and the leaf tip is less pointed. The fall color of this aspen, like its American cousin, is yellow to bright orange. Keep in mind that aspens, like all poplars, tend to grow root suckers that will turn into trees if not removed. Suckering is



most likely to occur if the surface roots are slightly damaged by tilling or transplanting in the rooting zone.

Last but not least is the **Cornelian-cherry dogwood** (*Cornus mas*). Ori-

nally from central and southeastern Europe, it spread to the rest of the continent a long time ago. It is sometimes found in Europe in natural hedgerows, but in America it is grown mostly as an ornamental tree.

The leaf resembles those of other dogwoods—glossy green with veins starting along the center and curving towards the tip—but the blossoms are completely different. Opening at the same time as crocuses, the flowers are light yellow, tiny, and grouped in globose clusters along the stems. When seen in full bloom, the Cornelian-cherry dogwood always surprises people with its delicate beauty. Another asset of this medium-size dogwood (25-30 feet in height) is its berries that ripen in September and can be made into a tasty jelly.

My helpful hint this time is a simple but important one: Always ask nurseries for trees by using the trees' botanical names, not their common names. A rose is a rose is a rose, perhaps. But an "aspen" is not necessarily the aspen that you are really looking for!

Alby Thoumsin is a certified arborist.

rural area residents—refer to cottonwoods as “balm” or “bam” trees, both of which are simply diminutives of the original name. The rest of us call them cottonwoods—or *Populus trichocarpa*.

The fragrant foliage of cottonwoods persists into early summer, when the seeds of the “female” trees ripen and begin to float around in the wind, attached to their fluffy, cotton-like parachutes. If a seed should land on a suitable site (e.g., an open gravel bar along the Willamette River), it may germinate and start a new generation of trees. Unlike the large, heart-shaped leaves of older cottonwoods, young seedlings have long, oval-shaped leaves.

Then, throughout the summer here in the valley, the cottonwoods’ canopies flutter wildly in the prevailing north winds, revealing the silvery-white undersides of the leaves and creating a soothing sound as well. Like “quaking” aspens, the petioles or leaf stalks of cottonwoods are flat in cross-section, so they move easily with the slightest breeze.

The biggest concentrations of cottonwoods occur along larger water-



Sticky scales from cottonwood buds.

courses in our area such as the Willamette and McKenzie Rivers because they need access to summer water to thrive. However, because of human activities associated with these rivers—the reduction of seasonal flooding, in particular, due to upriver dams—there are fewer and fewer appropriate sites for new cottonwoods to get started. So the cottonwood population is aging, especially in urban areas where the rivers are the most severely controlled. Over time, the cottonwoods will likely disappear and those sites will be taken over by Oregon ash and bigleaf maple,



Young cottonwood leaves in early spring...you can almost smell them!

both of which can germinate and grow beneath an existing forest canopy, unlike cottonwoods which need a “disturbed” and sunny site for germination.

As wonderful a tree as the cottonwood is, it is not really appropriate in most residential and commercial landscapes—unless, of course, the site is near a river. Because of their exuberant growth, they tend to be weak-wooded, an attribute that is not “bad” in and of itself but could cause serious problems near houses and other property. Moreover, because they need so much water, their roots will grow anywhere they can to get it and, in the process, those roots compete vigorously with other, less aggressive plants you might be trying to grow nearby.

However, contrary to popular belief, cottonwoods are not a threat to sanitary sewer pipes unless those pipes already have cracks or breaks where a root might get in. But then, *any* kind of tree—not just cottonwoods—would do that just to tap into the yummy water and nutrients found inside the pipes!

Some older cottonwoods are prime nesting sites for great blue herons. These large wading birds nest colonial-ly and require fairly substantial trees to

support their heavy nests of twigs and branches. Although they will use other trees species for nesting, they seem to prefer cottonwoods. Ospreys, too, will nest in old cottonwoods with broken tops. And just north of Eugene, there is at least one bald eagle nest in the crotch of a large riverside cottonwood.

So when you are down by the river sometime this spring and remark on the “balminess” of the air—the word properly refers to the scent of the air, not its temperature—think kindly of these grand trees that grace our local riparian areas. Although you or someone you know may be allergic to the trees’ pollen in spring, or you may find the cottony seeds to be a nuisance in early summer, remember that cottonwoods “belong” here in the upper Willamette Valley and they were here first.

Should they ever disappear, this part of the world would be a decidedly less fragrant place.

Whitey Lueck is a teacher and tree-enthusiast with a background in botany, horticulture, forest ecology, and landscape design. Whitey teaches a popular course, Trees Across Oregon, for the UO Department of Landscape Architecture.



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ETF's Annual Celebration of Trees a Success

by Jane Renfro Smith

President Alby Thoumsin welcomed approximately 70 guests at the February event, hosted by ETF at EWEB's riverfront facility. The annual event, with its tree-green theme in decorations, Legacy Tree posters, program and even leaf-shaped cookies was a festive occasion reminding guests of how significant ETF supporters and volunteers are to the public's continued interest in preserving Eugene's urban forest.

Copies of ETF's annual *Report to the Community* were distributed, detailing the organization's achievements the previous year in tree planting, education, and advocacy, as well as its financial status. Alby also announced that the ETF Board is currently engaged in special fund raising efforts to support the hiring of an executive assistant.

The Big Leaf Award for excellence in tree stewardship and management was given to the Friends of Hendricks Park. David Moon, its president, accepted the maple leaf-shaped wooden plaque on behalf of the organization, as well as congratulations from ETF for the work of its volunteers in collaboration with the City's Parks and Open Space staff.

The evening's speaker was well-known local field ecologist and botanist Bruce Newhouse whose areas of interest and work have been broad in scope. This night he narrated a slide presentation on fungi, a prominent natural neighbor of trees in our woods and forests, giving his audience an underground view of their often unseen complexities and varieties and relationships. This large and ever-present group of organisms includes toadstools, molds, and mushrooms.

The Celebration planning committee surprised everyone with its enthusiastic singing of Joyce Kilmer's sentimental song, "Trees." Great door prizes from local merchants were handed out to more than a dozen people as well as to the winner of the hazelnut guessing game. Refreshment tables were brought in, and guests invited to munch and mingle, which they did, with enthusiasm. This annual event offers many opportunities to talk and network with friends, colleagues, volunteers, and newcomers, all of whom share the common bond of respect and appreciation for our natural landscape, our heritage of trees, and a desire to preserve and promote this prominent feature of our city, the urban forest.