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GUEST COLUMN

Significance of trees grows on you

By REESE HALTER

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It is appropriate that the most recognized and celebrated day of the year — Christmas — the birth of Christ, is also focused around trees. Trees are truly remarkable.

Urban trees provide a healthy environment for people and animals, remove air pollution and smog, and save communities millions of dollars a year by stabilizing storm-water runoff. Moreover, urban trees reduce energy costs for both heating and cooling by some 40 percent in our homes and buildings.

In the wild, our forests provide massive watersheds all throughout western North America that support 55 million people. Those mature subalpine forests help retain snowfall in the winter and slowly release meltwaters in the springtime that recharge reservoirs. Hundreds of billions of tree roots provide the most effective form of water filtration known to humankind.

Trees provide scrumptious spices including cinnamon — known to lower our blood sugar.

Trees grow incredible fruits like apples, with apple-skin being one of the best recognized natural fibers that helps prevent colon cancer.

Trees produce potent medicines. From the South American cinchona trees, the drug quinine was derived to help fight malaria. From the Pacific Northwest yew tree came taxol — the billion-dollar blockbuster that offers hope to those with breast, ovarian and lung cancers, coronary disease and even AIDS. From the Chinese Camptotheca trees, camptothecin is being trialed for breast, prostate, pancreas, ovarian, leukemia, lymphoma cancers and malignant melanoma.

Interestingly, scientists have known for at least the past couple decades that old trees are particularly important. In fact, the largest single-stemmed tree — General Sherman — a Sierra Nevada sequoia, holds several astounding records. It has been hit at least three times with over 100 million volts of electricity or lightning yet it is likely still the fastest-growing tree on the planet, adding the equivalent volume of wood in a tree 1 1/2 feet thick and 60 feet tall every year.

Incidentally, the tannic acid present in its near-fireproof bark is the same chemical used in all fire extinguishers.

The oldest single-stemmed tree, a bristlecone pine named Methuselah, lives in east central California on the White Mountains almost two miles above sea level in an extreme environment bombarded by ultraviolet radiation, blasted regularly by 80-mile-an-hour winds and has a growing season of about six weeks a year. It is more than 4,500 years old and has witnessed more than 1.6 million sunrises. The tree rings it lays down, almost every year, are a living window back in time assisting climate scientists as they grapple to comprehend how life is adjusting to climate change.

Some groundbreaking work by Mark Harmon and others found that the conversion of Pacific Northwest old growth to young fast-growing forests did not decrease atmospheric carbon as compared to old-growth forests, which capture and store vast amounts of CO₂. It took those low-elevation, second-growth forests at least 200 years to accumulate the CO₂ storage capacity of the existing living old-growth forests. In other words, old-growth forests are invaluable, massive, living carbon warehouses.

Urban trees also play a crucial role in our towns and cities. In one year's time one mature tree gives off enough oxygen for a family of four while at the same time urban trees help suck the rising greenhouse gas CO₂ out of the air.

At Christmas consider buying a live tree and celebrate the holidays with friends and family; then celebrate the magnificence of your living tree by planting it in your yard.

Reese Halter is a motivational speaker and founder of the international conservation institute Global Forest Science.

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