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Back to Nature

Giving thanks to the giving tree

by Dr. Reese Halter

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It is indeed appropriate this Earth Day to celebrate the magnificent bounty that the Earth provides for over 6.8 billion people — and trees are at the heart of the festivities.

Trees are truly remarkable.

Urban trees provide a healthy environment for people and animals. Urban trees and forests remove air pollution and smog; and they 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 melt-waters in the springtime that recharge reservoirs. Trillions of tree roots provide the most effective form of water filtration known to humankind.

Wild forests in California's Sierra Nevada's supply almost 90 percent of the fresh water for the most intensive agricultural system on the planet, 38 million people's daily drinking water, the eighth mightiest industrial economy on the globe and tens of millions of tourists that visit our state each year.

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 highest recognized natural fibers that helps prevent colon cancer.

In California with the help of the bees, trees provide us with lemons, oranges and grapefruits; and we grow more almonds than anywhere else in the world. Almonds are also an excellent source of protein and fiber. And let's not forget that California is also a world leader in avocado production — rich in Omega-3s that help preclude coronary disease.

Trees produce potent medicines. From the South American cinchona trees, the drug quinine was derived to help fight the mosquito-borne disease malaria. From the Pacific Northwest yew tree came taxol, the billion-dollar blockbuster that offers hope to those afflicted with breast, ovarian and lung cancers, coronary disease and even AIDS. From the Chinese Camptotheca trees, camptothecin is being trialed for breast, prostate, pancreatic, ovarian, leukemia, and lymphoma cancers as well as 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. He's been hit at least three times with over 100 million volts of electricity or lightning yet he's likely still the fastest growing tree on the planet, adding the equivalent volume of wood in a tree 1.5-foot thick and 60-foot tall every year. Incidentally, the tannic acid present in his 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 ultra violet radiation, blasted regularly by 80 mph winds and a growing season of about six weeks a year. He's over 4,700 years old and witnessed more than 1.7 million sunrises. The tree rings he 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 ground-breaking work at Oregon State University at Mark Harmon's lab 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 old growth forests. In other words, old growth forests are invaluable, massive living carbon warehouses that unequivocally require protection from being harvested.

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.

This Earth Day consider buying a fruit tree and celebrate with family and friends by planting it in your yard.

Dr. Reese Halter is a conservation biologist at Cal Lutheran University and a public speaker. His latest book is "The Mysteries of the Redwood Forest with Bruni the Bear!" Follow him: twitter.com/DrReeseHalter.