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Volume 3, Issue 3

96

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Year of the Garden
Année du jardin
2022
Official English
Language
Magazine

In praise of messy trees

By Michael Rosen

“Ten trees you should never plant in your garden”, “how certain trees can harm your garden”, “trees to avoid”, “five worst messy trees for the lazy landscaper”, “14 messy trees that make a mess of your yard”, “trash trees – avoid planting messy, smelly trees”... and then there’s the passive-aggressive, “the least messy trees for your yard”. It’s all a sort of requiem for the fact that trees are living organisms with bark, leaves, flowers and fruit. Academics even have a formal name for these: “ecosystem disservices”.

It’s a sign of the times that we see so much disinformation (and paranoia) on messy trees. Part of this is the new ethic in residential development – enormous houses, small yards with a minimum of: grass, trees, raised beds or anything green. Many new subdivisions sell themselves on having “no yard to clean” complete with sterile courtyards of paving stones, AstroTurf and monster homes taking up as much space as possible as people increasingly seek refuge inside. Countless real estate sites extol the virtues of these yards. Often, they challenge the reader with leading questions such as this one:

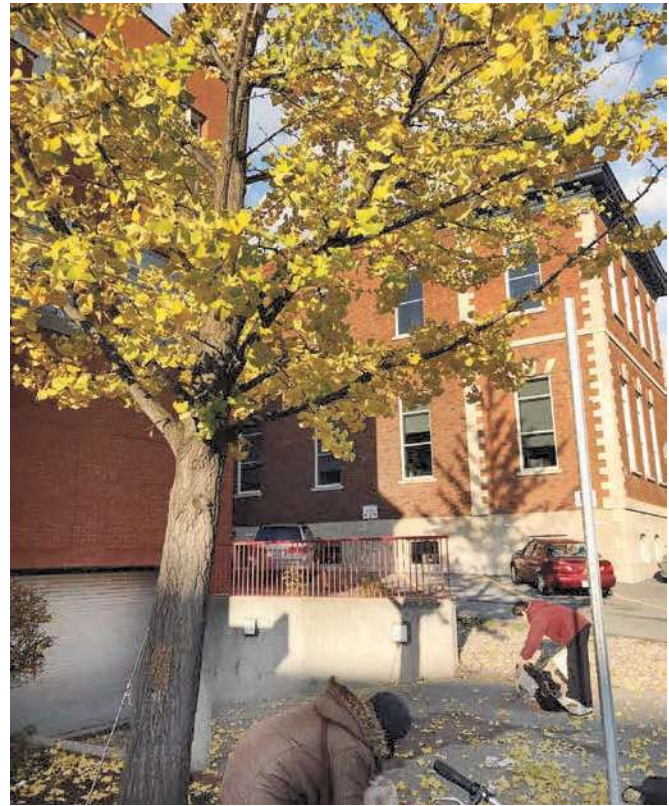
“How often do you use your current outdoor space? How much of the yard do you use on a regular basis? Do your outdoor activities have to be at home, or can they still be enjoyed in a public space, such as a park? Which is more useful to your lifestyle, a yard or more space in the house?... This leads people to sacrifice the size of the yard in exchange for a larger house. Next, there is a growing number of homeowners who are just uninterested in a large backyard. This large population of homeowners enjoy a lifestyle in which the yard adds no value and/or they see the maintenance of the yard as an added unnecessary expense rather than an amenity.... The result is a clean and well-maintained neighborhood that maintains its value.” (Gulfstate Homebuyers, 2022).

There really is no tree which can escape the wrath of the 21st-century persnickety homeowner eager to live a maintenance-free existence, never to pick up a leaf, prune a branch or smell the earth. Lord help us.

Sugar maple? Maple keys. Norway maple? Leaves, keys, and protruding roots. Honey locust? Tiny leaves I cannot get with my rake. Female ginkgoes? Vomit-smelling fruit. Lilacs? Perfumy smell and a weedy form. Oak? Persistent leaves, acorns, and they’re just too big. Hemlocks? Cones. Walnuts? Missile-like nuts aiming for my car. Apples? Apples. Cherries? Cherries. And so forth.

As you can tell, my patience for these anti-arboreal crusaders is extremely limited. Already on single-sex trees (“dioecious trees” like poplar, willow, white ash, and ginkgo) nurseries seek to only sell male trees (therefore with no dropping fruit). But of course, this does not make everyone happy either as male trees’ pollen can cause problems for the allergic. Oh well.

“Messy trees” is right up there with “dangerous trees” in the perpetuation of tree myths. I know this from personal experience. We live in the country, yet my children’s elementary school sat in a school landscape that



Female ginkgos have smelly fruit..

is all too familiar to Canadians: an acre of asphalt, some swings and teeter totters, surrounded by a chain link fence. I approached the principal to see if she was interested in me facilitating a greening plan for the school yard. “Sure,” she said, “you just have to run it by the school board.”

I remember explaining the plan to the “maintenance specialist”. It was an incredibly educational experience for me. In the space of 15 minutes, he confirmed every bad (and technically flawed) stereotype about trees in urban areas: “The roots will crack the school’s foundation,” “The branches could break a window,” “The leaves will rot the roof shingles,” “Children will slip on the leaves”, “The vines will pull out the bricks off the school wall”, and my favourite, “The kids will climb the trees one day, fall, and hurt themselves.”

I walked away shaking my head – yet those statements went on to form the basis for a pamphlet I wrote for Tree Canada called Greening Canada’s Schoolyards.

Quite frequently, people take their lead from political leaders and governments. In 1981, US President Ronald Reagan claimed that trees produce more air pollution than automobiles, fueling a spate of jokes about killer trees. He was mostly wrong, but not completely. In hot weather, trees release volatile organic hydrocarbons including terpenes and isoprenes linked to photochemical smog. However, he confused the nitrous oxide that trees produce with nitrogen dioxide, a dangerous atmospheric pollution from automobiles. But the message was clear – Reagan was not catering to the tree-hugging vote.



Oak trees drop acorns.



Honey locust has small leaves that are difficult to rake.



Lilacs are considered weedy and perfumey.



Hemlock trees drop cones.

And neither, one may argue, are municipalities. Sure, most will profess the International Society of Arboriculture’s slogan “Trees are Good”. Any glance at a municipal website will display messages around the virtues of planting trees, information on the latest bugs and diseases and where to call if a city tree branch lands on your roof, but other pieces of municipal regulation set the stage for the decidedly anti-mess (and anti-natural) message.

“Property standards” – a catch phrase that includes bylaws regarding the appearance of yards consistently raises its ugly head. Holdovers from the Leave it to Beaver era of 1950s traditionalism, most municipalities take it upon themselves to be the arbiters of how one person’s mess can be another one’s naturalization project. There are countless stories of the work of pollinator-friendly homeowners being castigated by property standard bylaws, forced

to hack down goldenrod patches or mow down long stem grasses because of neighbour complaints of a messy yard. It’s time for these bylaws to move into the 21st century.

The poor foresters who work for municipalities endure endless criticism of their species choices, even those made many years before they were born. Where it is all this headed, I am not sure but if we are to break our compulsion for a life indoors, in front of a screen and far from the natural world, we need to live with the incongruities, the imperfections and the wonder that gardening outdoors with trees will give us. It is one of our only hopes.

Things discarded from trees enrich our soils, give habitat to bees and other insects and form part of the ecosystem for others. In these times, this is a small part but is very definitely part of the solution going forward. Messy trees? The ultimate oxymoron. 🌿

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