

## The Gift of a Sassafras

by Mac Hart

*(EJC Arboretum Newsletter Article, Continued Here)*

Since early childhood days of roaming the hardwood forest behind my York County, Pennsylvania home, I have been captivated by sassafras trees: the root beer flavored roots; its whimsical leaf canopy (think the cartoon-like trees in Dr. Suess's children's book, *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*); and the brilliant reds, oranges, purples and pinks of its fall foliage. They were easy to spot in the woods. And, in the fall, their stunningly colorful leaves leapt out from the dark green stands of mountain laurel in the open rocky woodlands behind our home.

My wife and I are perennial transplants.

Two years ago, after retiring, we migrated west across the Blue Ridge Mountains and settled in the Shenandoah Valley to live closer to our daughter and her family.

So, here I am again – newly transplanted. Much is uncertain; nothing is guaranteed. Will I make new friends? Will I thrive in this place? I long to discover, or create, a supportive and vibrant community where I can risk exploring new pursuits and cultivate well-rooted ones. Who knows, the doors of friendship may fling wide open as mutual passions surface. Uprooting from a home of thirty years was agonizing, but reportedly this fertile Valley is teeming with opportunity. If friendships are to flourish, however, I must be willing to tender my best gifts to natives in unspoken give-and-take relationship.

I am learning that trees benefit from living in the community of other trees (where they can “communicate” and share resources), in much the same way that people thrive from living in community with one another.

If our land is to flourish, I must be willing to invest my time, hard work, and hard-earned dollars on the trees in our backyard. Perhaps adding to their number.

Last fall, after moving into our new house, I purchased and planted several expensive saplings: two serviceberries, a choke cherry, and an Eastern redbud – all “native” to Virginia's ridge-and-mountain region. These trees had been well-nurtured in their respective nurseries, so the transplants survived without a hitch.

In hopes of maximizing biodiversity in the yard, I choose to plant only “native” trees, shrubs, and grasses: those that have been growing naturally in our region for millennia. The reasoning is remarkably straightforward: the greater the number of native trees and plants on a tract of land, the greater the number of beneficial insects, birds, bees, and butterflies (*Nature's Best Hope*, Douglas Tallamy, p.90).

It is tempting to claim that my interest in planting sassafras is strictly a matter of selecting native trees that will most powerfully improve the wildlife habitat on our property. However, the wildlife-enhancing benefits of planting sassafras are modest at best. Sassafras serves as a host plant to only 34 varieties of moths and butterflies. Heavy hitters such as

the oak and hickory trees serve as caterpillar host plants to 513 species, and 239 species respectively, of butterflies and moths.

My approach to unearthing the tree is surgical. I gather my leather gloves and tools from the car and make my way up the hill to the sassafras' location. Dropping to my knees, I carefully scrape the wet layer of leaves back from the base of the tree to inspect the trunk and surface root mat. The tree looks healthy. No sign of damage or disease. I use my heavy digging bar to make the circular incision around the base of the tree, a 15-inch radius. The incision must be deep and clean, severing the ground-level secondary roots while carefully preserving the lengthy tap root directly underneath the trunk.

After 20 minutes of laboring, I discover the thick taproot and gently work the dirt away from it with my hands in hopes of tracking it to its deep underground source. Unexpectedly, four inches beneath the root ball, the tap root takes a sharp right-angle turn - now running perpendicular to the surface. So, I too, change directions and dig a lateral ditch to follow the deviant tap root to its softly-pointed tip.

I leverage the heavy root ball from its home in the ground with the digging iron, lifting the tree and root mat up and out of the hole onto the forest floor.

In the process of lifting the root ball, and to my horror, the tap root falls away from the root ball – disconnecting from its anchor point on the tree! How did this happen? I had been incredibly careful with the digging and unearthing. On closer inspection, I see that the “life-giving” tap root is dead. In fact, it has apparently been dead for some time. What had already promised to be a tricky affair is quickly approaching a mission-impossible-grade challenge.

*Why did the taproot disconnect from the root ball? Can a sassafras tree survive without its taproot? Should I just throw in the trowel and go home without the sapling?*

Shaken but undeterred, I lift and swing the tree and root ball into fifteen-gallon tub that I brought along to transport my “prize.”

It is a short walk to the car. I am thankful as the tree-filled tub is awkward and heavy. Fortunately, the tree fits easily into the back of my SUV and I make the short four-mile trip home.

Not wanting the sassafras tree to be out of the ground any longer than necessary, I arrive home and immediately begin digging a hole at the new location: the hillside bordering our patch of hardwoods where three towering pignut hickories will shelter the understory sapling from the sun and wind. A near-ideal location, I believe.

The experts recommend digging the hole twice as wide as the root ball, but no deeper than the height of the root ball. I tuck the sassafras into the newly-dug crater, back fill the dirt and tamp it into place, then soak the soil with a 5-gallon bucket of water. The tree looks very much at home. I feel hopeful.

Given that summer is upon us, I resolve to soak the tree roots daily for the next couple of months. My son David, an agricultural science graduate from Virginia Tech, insists that my transplanted tree will require this level of care to maximize its chances of survival.

Today is my grandson, "Patty Mac's," fourth birthday. He is my oldest son Andrew's youngest son, my namesake. He is a gift from God.

I had not intended to plant the sassafras in his honor, however as I gaze upon the sapling, I consider Patrick and each of my grandchildren. They are inheriting an endangered planet and will serve as the next generation of stewards in the global fight to preserve our precious and increasingly limited natural resources.

Will they love the woods and streams, the mountains and the meadows as much as I do? Will they understand the importance of giving thanks for all of the gifts that nature freely gives? Will they recognize that our fresh water, clean air, wild animals, trees, and birds are not inexhaustible? That our natural resources must be managed, cared for and protected? Who will teach them?

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology at SUNY and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation reminds us that,

***"Plants know how to make food and medicine from light and water, and then they give it away"*** (p.10).

Dr. Kimmerer goes on to say that,

***"Cultures of gratitude must also be cultures of reciprocity. Each person, human or no is bound to every other in a reciprocal relationship..."***

***... If an animal gives its life to feed me, I am in turn bound to support its life. If I receive a stream's gift of pure water, then I am responsible for returning a gift in kind. An integral part of a human's education is to know those duties and how to perform them"*** (p.115).

Today, I feel fortunate to be planting the rescued sassafras tree, this "gift," in my backyard. And I feel exceptionally grateful to have a role in raising, nurturing, and teaching my grandchildren.

Rearing young trees and children requires a great deal of care, prayer, and patience. Both are fragile, yet thankfully adaptive and forgiving. Loving attention in the nursery augurs well for healthy sprouting and maturing.

It is undeniable. In spite of my best efforts, this sassafras tree may die. In the fields of medicine and horticulture alike, transplant rejections are common even with the healthiest of subjects. I remind myself, *This tree was torn from its home and experienced a traumatic uprooting. All the care and attention in the world will not guarantee its survival.*

When life-threatening conditions set in, birds migrate; people emigrate; trees tend to stay put and to hope for the best.

I wonder how best to clasp hands with my native American brothers and sisters in expressing gratitude for the trees. Not just my newly-planted sassafras, but to trees everywhere for the extraordinary gifts they give: the cooling shade, their breath-taking beauty, fruits, nuts, lumber, medicines, wildlife support, water conservation, soil preservation, greenhouse gas containment, and the oxygenated air that we breath – indeed, the provisions for life on earth.

What is required of me in this reciprocal relationship? What is my obligation?

I reckon that my leading role of reciprocity with the trees will encompass caring for them, protecting them, and teaching others of their importance.

Walking and talking with my grandchildren in the woods, I will teach them to identify the trees and to honor who they are and how they function to sustain life in our world. *Oh, the places we will go*: Edith J. Carrier Arboretum, Shenandoah National Park, Virginia State Arboretum at Blandy, Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, not to mention our own teeming backyards.

As I step back to admire the newly-planted sassafras, I give thanks to Tree Life and for the remarkable gift of this rescued sapling. I whisper a promise to do everything in my power to care for and protect the tree in its new home in our woods, tucked under the sheltering limbs of the guardian hickories.

I also whisper a prayer: *Dear God, thank you for the undeserved gift of each one of my grandchildren. Please instill in each the certainty that he, or she, is infinitely treasured and wonderfully unique. As they live out their lives with others, inspire them to operate from a place of love, respect, and abundance rather than from a position of fear, hatred, and scarcity. Please stir them to practice gratitude and reciprocity for the abundant gifts that you have given: pure water, clean air, fish, birds, animals of every kind, trees, and the plants who “know how to make food and medicine from light and water, and then they give it away.” May they have the courage and conviction to take whatever action is necessary to protect our planet. Amen.*

What will I do if the transplant fails and this sassafras tree dies?

I will try again, of course.

**Mac Hart**  
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