

Jefferson's tiny trees flourish

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Commentary

At first glance, older people who plant trees - as many do this time of year - are the soul of generosity. People at an age when they might be well advised to buy only ripe bananas, not only buy green bananas but green trees as well, trees that will shade generations yet unborn.

Kindness is part of the motivation for planting a tree in old age. It's gratifying to reflect on the fact that people who don't yet exist will eventually enjoy the shade you provide.

But don't think tree planting in later years isn't also a selfish act. Old Thomas Jefferson said planting was one of his "great amusements," even when it involved "things which can only be for posterity." He said a person in his seventies "has no right to count on anything but annuals." (Annuals, for novices, are plants that croak over winter in the first year of their existence. Fortunately, most of us don't. We are perennials.)

You plant something as long-lived as a tree partly because you optimistically and somewhat selfishly believe you will live another decade or two and get to enjoy the results of your old, gray-green thumb.

But older people hedge their bets, as my wife and I did the other day. We were buying an ornamental tree. When the clerk asked if we wanted the large tree or the small economy model, we simultaneously answered, "Large!"

People our age plant large trees because we might not have time to see it develop into much. Instant gratification is the code of the aged. It's now or never.

When you're younger, it's different. Twenty-six years ago, I lifted a seven-foot northern red oak out of its nursery pot and dropped it into the hole I had dug near the house we had just moved into. It was kind of pathetic at first - especially for an oak. Oak trees are supposed to be tall and strong. The tree I planted was a scrawny little stick, looking sort of silly with our house towering above it.

Today, 26 years later, that tree is four stories high. The trunk is a foot and a half through. I have lived to enjoy the shade of my own sapling.

It's kind of scary - like holding Joseph, my first grandchild, in my arms 24 years ago and looking way up into his eyes today and hoping he doesn't accidentally sit on me.

Oh, it pleases a gardener to realize that his descendants way down the line in some new century will be shaded by the giant tree he started. And it tickles a person who planted a little two-leaf stick of a tree to eventually spot a bird's nest in that tree. It makes you feel like Jimmy Carter, building places for wee homeless birds to dwell in - Habitat for Feathered Friends.

But Jefferson was right. An old person who plants a tree also does so selfishly for the pure, raw, hedonistic pride of starting something wonderful. Planting a tree is a slightly feeble but constructive way of playing god.

Jefferson and I may wish you well in the shade of our trees when we are long gone. But make no mistake; what we do in the here and now is a power trip, whether that is Jefferson helping to create a massive forest of liberty or a cool, green forest for future birds and citizens.

Jefferson was the champ, but I plant my share of trees. And that is no mean feat here in what used to be a dry desert before irrigation. Over the decades, tens of thousands of us in this community have planted trees - trees that were insignificant at first. But right now, amid April showers, they tower over the spring, leafing out before our eyes and giving their annual gift of flowers.

We who live and garden here today are as much a part of that as Jefferson was a part of creating a new species of government with liberty and mutual respect among people high and low.

How he must have relished that as the new nation germinated and flourished, developing a style of citizen rule that is now planted for general betterment throughout much of the world.

He must have gone to his grave savoring his generous planting of life, liberty and the pursuit, not just of happiness but of his own pure unvarnished pleasure during his gentle senior years.

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