



## **Time and Trees**

It's the new year again, when we're moved to reflect on the passing of time, on endings and beginnings. I came face to face with temporality a few weeks ago in my yard, when an enormous, very sick oak tree had to come down. I counted the rings as best I could; there were over a hundred. A hundred years ago, automobiles and telephones were still primitive luxuries, most Americans were farmers, and women had just gotten the vote. How many stories were encompassed in that tree's lifetime! The rings varied in width, telling another story: of summers of ample rainfall and summers of drought, like the one just past. The one that delivered the last fatal blow to a tree already weakened by pests and disease. A tree that stood for over a century, now nothing but a pile of firewood.

All over our state the same story is repeated, as our beautiful native trees fall victim to drought, disease, and insects. The loss is the equivalent of 500,000 acres of dead trees. All lost trees are to be mourned, but none so much as the white oak, which supports more native insects and moths (and the birds who feed them to their young) than any other tree we grow—450-500 species, at last count. Plant swamp maples and sugar maples; plant ash trees, so hard hit by the emerald ash borer; plant pin oaks and red oaks, but above all, plant white oaks. I once watched a lecture on trees, in which the speaker proudly showed off an oak he'd grown from an acorn fifteen years earlier. Oaks have a reputation for being slow-growing, but this one was already over twenty feet tall.

As the old saying goes, the best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The second best time is today. I'll replace my lost oak, but not in the same space. My new neighbor's power lines stretch across the space its branches used to occupy, so replanting such a tall-growing tree wouldn't make sense. Instead, I'll plant smaller trees near the street. Eversource has a list of suggested small trees that won't interfere with power lines, but I encourage you to ignore their list, because few if any of the trees listed are native. That's a lost opportunity, because we have lots of handsome native small trees to choose from: dogwood (be sure to buy the native *cornus florida*, not the foreign *cornus kousa*); hawthorn; shadbush (serviceberry); and native witch hazel. Try native crabapples, wild plum, and the shorter varieties of birch, with their peeling bark that adds so much interest to the winter landscape.

The act of planting a tree is optimism made manifest. It's our gift to the future. The trees we plant this year will shelter the grandchildren of people not yet born. What better reminder of how our human lives are inextricably tied to, and dependent on, the millions of other species existing on our small blue planet? For this new year, resolve to plant at least one tree, and resolve, further, to do what is necessary to allow it, and us, to thrive.