



Beauty and the Birch

I planted a tree today. Some months ago, you may recall, I cautioned you on the ill-advised practice of going overboard at the fall sales, buying plants without any idea where they will fit in your overall plan. Yes, it was one of those.

In my defense, I did have at least a vague idea of its ultimate destination. It's a river birch, *Betula nigra*, and I have a river, or at least a dammed-up stream. I knew it would go 'somewhere' nearby. (Don't let a lack of waterfront discourage you from buying one for your own yard, though; my sister has a thriving specimen at the intersection of her driveway and sidewalk.)

It was a picture-perfect fall day for planting, just the right temperature to be cool enough while digging, yet warm enough even when not doing anything but walking around. The leaves had mostly hung on until today, but the combination of their advancing age and a slight breeze sent showers of bright yellow and bronze twirling and dancing down. The sky was pale grey, with occasional moments of sun, and the softness of the air presaged approaching rain. Only light showers expected today, but if tonight's rain is as steady as predicted, most of the leaves will be off the trees by morning. Too soon, as ever. Soon the clocks will be set back, too, and that is *always* too soon.

So I headed out back to pick a spot. The grass is allowed to grow long near the pond, but the deer have beaten down a path a few feet from the water. So, not there. A huge, ancient oak had fallen a few years ago, leaving a sunny opening I had thought might suit, but that spot had already been claimed by a young sycamore, child of Gerry's huge tree next door. Not there, either. Fifteen feet from the pond, then, and farther from the sycamore. Adding to a perennial bed requires a complicated balancing of color, texture, and bloom time, and a fifteen-foot relocation could upset the entire scheme. In the wilder area near the pond, though, it's barely a nudge.

Site chosen, I filled the wheelbarrow with tree, tools, and compost, and brought everything down, using the pathway so thoughtfully provided by the deer. The tree went in fairly easily, and I was careful to make sure that it ended up just a bit proud of the surrounding soil—too deep, and the roots will suffocate. Last step was watering it in. Only when I went to fill the bucket with pond water did I realize how dry this fall has been: the overflow pipe stands six inches above the water level, and the normally

gently sloping banks now cut down sharply to the muddy floor. I dipped the bucket through a solid blanket of leaves, and the water that filled it was cold, murky and brown.

Finally I stepped back to admire the new planting. It made a thoughtful commentary on the circle of life: the venerable oak, which had finally reached the end of its very long life; the fast growing, opportunistic young sycamore, destined to rival or even exceed the oak's size; and the modestly-sized birch, just settling in.

River birch bark is dark brown on very young shoots, but by the time the trunk is an inch or more in diameter it fades to a pale buff color, showing warm cinnamon on the underside as it ages, curls, and peels away from the trunk. Why choose it instead of the showy, imported European white birch, so beloved for Christmas cards and Yule log vignettes? I admire the white birch as much as anyone, and would love to have a clump to brighten my woods, but even if I weren't striving to plant natives, a white birch would be a sad, bad, and ultimately futile choice.

Many of us are aware of the emerald ash borer, an insect which has killed uncounted thousands of our native ash trees. It bores into the bark, tunneling underneath, disrupting transportation of water and nutrients through the tree. As it happens, there is another insect known as the bronze birch borer. It kills birch trees exactly the same way. My lovely river birch, having evolved in tandem with the bug, is almost entirely immune to its predations: in a twenty-year study, river birches experienced only a 2% mortality rate. Their American cousins, paper birch and grey birch, also defeated the borer fairly well, although they needed irrigation to prevent drought-induced stress in order to fight back. But European and Asian varieties are defenseless: by the end of the study, every tree had died. You can still buy them; nurseries sell lots of plants destined for failure in our ecosystem, and you might get five or even ten years of pleasure before they succumb. By then, my little tree will be grown and glorious—and thriving.