

## Trees: The act of planting and faith in the future

By Bailey Thomson

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When I was 10, our 4-H teacher gave each student in our class a small bundle of loblolly pines. Plant these trees for the future, he said.

I followed his instructions. Our house sat on an acre of yard and pasture. I must have planted 50 of the seedlings, carefully placing each one into a hole, then closing the red earth behind it.

Our horse trampled the pines I had planted along the pasture's fence line. Careless mowers clipped others. And some seedlings simply couldn't get a toehold. After all my work, only one tree, tucked into a corner at the front of the house, survived.

I seldom fail to drive past the old place when I visit my home town, Aliceville. The house needs work, and no horses graze in what's left of the pasture. But my solitary pine still stands, with its branches full and its trunk straight and sturdy. That tree and a wall, crumbling now, that I built with the help of a friend from high school are reminders that I once passed that way.

Trees evoke sweet memories and expectations. I don't know where I will be 40 years from now, but I hope the red maple and the two dogwoods I planted this week where I now live will be giving pleasure to someone.

A couple of years ago, I had to cut about 70 pines from our lot after beetles ravaged them. They had been planted when the dirt under our neighborhood was farm land. Because this variety of pine was developed for the pulp mills, the trees grew quickly. But their soft wood invited boring beetles during a long dry period. We did salvage about a dozen pines, scattered across the property. With the three cherry trees that had come up as volunteers, the remaining pines now have a more natural appearance, in contrast to the old tree farm's regimented rows.

With space now open for planting, I can brighten this corner of our subdivision with hardwoods, including flowering varieties. The red clay limits my choices. In the summer, it has the consistency of a brick. But with enough work and patience, the place may one day be a sanctuary for birds and shade-loving humans.

I draw inspiration from J. Sterling Morton, who like me was a journalist. In 1854, he and his wife moved from Detroit to the Nebraska territory, where they encountered the wind-swept Great Plains. Morton used his newspaper to encourage settlers to plant trees, not just for beauty but also to help hold the soil in place once plows had broken the prairie earth. In 1872, his efforts led to the first Arbor Day, during which Nebraskans planted a million trees. School children took up the cause, and the movement spread to other states, including those where clear-cutting had destroyed old growths of hardwood and

white pine.

Arbor Day became a national event, celebrated on the last Friday in April. States still observe their own special days, according to their growing seasons, and they sport their official trees. Alabama has the longleaf pine, which once covered much of the southern part of the state until settlers and loggers destroyed the great forests. The tree is making a comeback, thanks to the good work of a group called the Longleaf Alliance. Landowners with long-term profits in mind are choosing this valuable pine over the fast-growing pulpwood varieties.

As the founder of Arbor Day, Morton believed we hold this earth as trustees for succeeding generations. We have a duty, therefore, to pass on this legacy in better condition than what we inherited. Like other hard-nosed conservationists, including President Theodore Roosevelt, he saw tree planting as a necessity to repair the damage done to the land in the name of progress. But Morton also understood our deeper needs as humans. “The cultivation of trees is the cultivation of the good, the beautiful, and the ennobling in man,” he said.

The Arbor Day Foundation in Lincoln, Neb., will send you 10 seedlings when you pay your membership dues of \$10. You can also purchase bare-root trees from them that are three to four feet high. The foundation’s web site, [www.arborday.org](http://www.arborday.org), will help you select the right varieties for your area and show you how to plant them.

You can also purchase young trees at your local nursery, as I did.

These trees typically come in containers with root balls wrapped in burlap. I find them easier to plant. Besides, I like talking shop with the nursery owners and workers.

After all, I’ve been in the tree-planting business for more than four decades — and I have evidence to prove it.

*Used by permission. Bailey Thomson was associate professor of journalism at the University of Alabama. Mr. Thomson (1949-2003) was a stalwart advocate for Alabama's poor and middle classes often writing about Alabama's unfulfilled potential—politically, socially, and economically.*