

The Librarian's Desk . . .

One day in the reference aisle, our massive Oxford English Dictionary fell open to the word "Beech." At twelve volumes, six supplements, and 14,880 pages, thankfully, nobody was injured. Cradling the tome, I squinted at its miniscule font (the set comes with a magnifying glass) and was quite amused to read that the etymological origin of the word *beech* is connected to the word *book*, the suggestion being that inscriptions were first made on "beechen tablets," or cut in the bark of the genus.

Even curbside Library patrons (those commuters who pull into our lot attempting to tap into our WIFI) know that the European Beech on the Municipal Green is the icon of the Library. I was awestruck when Town Arborist Karl Heinz told me its root system has the same circumference as its canopy. I could visualize its underground branches extending to the edges of Route 16, making girders at the structural foundation.

Everyone agrees that the Library's beech tree is a landmark, a stately, symmetrical specimen. Many people stop to ask after its health and age. The age and genus of the tree is a recurring question asked the Librarians, so that the Library Trustees placed a descriptive bronze marker at the base of the tree. The marker reads "Fagus sylvatica 'atropunicea'. Common name: Purple Beech."

The tree was planted in March 1876, so that it is 131 years old, not including the year or years it may have on its dendrochronology from the nursery. Town Historian Betsy Johnson responded a few years ago to a Boston Globe Q&A history column that sought information on the tree. Betsy reported: "the European purple beech tree was planted in March 1876, when the site of the current library was occupied by a public school. It was one of 16 trees purchased by the school's principal from Nonantum Hill Nursery in Brighton. Most of the trees cost \$1, but the European purple beech tree cost \$4, which was equivalent to about four days' pay. That tree is the only one of the 16 still standing. It was a gift of the graduating class of Sawin Academy-Dowse High School. That school, the first public high school in Sherborn, was built in 1858 with funds given to the Town by Natick resident Martha Sawin and Cambridgeport bookbinder Thomas Dowse, both of whom had roots in Sherborn." Books and roots analogies abound!

The tree has the contours of a globe artichoke, and its limbs are tapered and graceful. In my 19-year tenure, it has dropped only one limb. Throughout its season, the foliage turns from chartreuse-green to copper, then oxblood purple to green again, while it drops spiny beechnut husks that we like to collect for wreaths, ornaments, and nature crafts. There is a lot going on with this tree. The breadth of the beech now encroaches on lawn space for the Arts and Crafts Fair, but we work with it. At the Friends' summer concerts, it is challenging to patrol children's instant attraction to climb and bounce on the lithe lower limbs because grown-ups are tempted to do so themselves. Who needs climbing walls?

The Librarians enjoy giving driving directions to get here. To find us, we say, you either bang a left or a right at a steepled white church depending upon your orientation, and the Library is located at the crossroads, next to Town Hall, behind an enormous tree on the Green. Ubiquitous New England coordinates excepting, we add, the Library is modern.

Daily we pay homage to the beech tree. But in spring we grow fickle because of the daffodils. Let us now turn our thoughts to the daffodil.

At the time of this writing, it is in Sherborn, “in time of daffodils (who know the goal of living is to grow)” – e.e.cummings. In 2007, the Sherborn Daffodil Trail celebrates its 25th anniversary, the silver anniversary of the golden flower that braids Sherborn roads and landscapes. The daffodil is perhaps as literary a flower as the rose. In the symbolic daffodil, our beech tree icon has a companion. Either tree or flower are symbols on the Friends’ stationary and book bags, on our website, and as a logo on our fund-raiser sweatshirts. The tree, after all, pre-dates this facility by more than 100 years. The daffodil trail, on the other hand, was planted in 1982 as a living memorial to honor the contributions of Richard and Mary B. Saltonstall for their gift of this Library to the Town, and to their enrichment of community life by active, passionate voluntarism.

The Daffodil Trail continues to sparkle on embankments, soften stone outcroppings, wend its way along the berms of Sherborn, and make sunny pools on suburban lawns planted by homeowners who want to feel connected to the public trail. Turn the world inside out and the Daffodil Trail becomes an earthy constellation. Citizens may order and purchase robust, daffodil bulbs now to be delivered in time for fall planting. Several varieties and other bulbs may be viewed on the organization’s website located at sherborndaffodiltrail.org. Proceeds are used to expand and maintain the Trail, as well as supporting other municipal beautification and landscaping projects.

The meaning of the gift of the daffodil flower is “regard.” In my mind, the definition of regard is not only worthy acknowledgement, but also an inspired respect. The Daffodil Trail, the rebirth of its flowers and widening view I liken to regenerations of citizens who plant, beautify, and thank. The Purple Beech Tree shows transformational ability while staying in one place, growth that is deeply rooted, and continuity in the passage of time. These, I believe, are the ideas that residents of Sherborn past and present wanted to impart about living here. That they are associated with the Library leaves these ideas open for personal understanding and interpretation.

Sherborn, happy spring!

Elizabeth Johnston,

Library Director