

WHEN A TREE FALLS

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My last column described the rather miraculous escape by Fern's and my sacred garden when Hurricane Isabel had her way with Central Virginia. We were very, very lucky: a single limb split from our Sweet Gum and Old Man Oak barely lost a twig. Right now, in what

passes for deep winter these days in our wrecked climate, I have the leisure to reflect, as gardeners do before we start our seeds for spring. Today I'm thinking about what did not escape the storm and what spiritually oriented gardeners can do about that.

The time around the Winter Solstice is a time of renewal for neo-pagans and many other spiritual seekers, The days begin to lengthen, paradoxically, even as winter begins. But much cold and darkness remain ahead of us, even in this scary time of global warming. For gardeners, one important way to shake off the winter chills and metaphysical doubts that accompany them is to scan seed catalogs, to find solace in their promises of a harvest to come, of tall plants in sunlit garden beds and borders.

Even as I mark future purchases in my well-thumbed copy of Richter's, planning my venture to grow herbs commercially, my plans for this year go beyond expanded gardens. To be sure, seed catalogs breed ambition for even the most modest garden, but

I'm thinking that the time has come to do some gardening for our city. 10,000 trees fell during Isabel's night of terror, and given the stretched budgets in town, many of empty spots in our urban forest will remain that way for years. I moved to the city from the traffic-and-strip-mall ruined suburbs partly for our majestic street-trees and parks—it is hard to find that type of civic ambience elsewhere in our region. Now part of that ambience is ricked as firewood all over town; I made my own pile of storm-fall oak for next year's fires.

The saddest losses to me were five oaks near Ginter Park's walking labyrinth, built on property owned by Union Theological Seminary. One particularly huge oak stood closest to the labyrinth, a tree I've sat under for contemplation and worship. When it fell, in a parting gesture, this great tree's uppermost branches brushed the curved path of the labyrinth that so many of us have walked over the years. On Solstice night, as I prepared to walk the labyrinth by candlelight and welcome the sun's rebirth, I first went to the raw wounds in the earth left where the oak's root ball had been. Deep craters full of rain: nothing remained but cold water and reflected starlight. Would that I had even one acorn.

Yet I am certain we can fix this, as we can fix this often-sad, often sadly beautiful, world of ours with enough willpower and strength.

I rev up the chain saw to take down trees on the family's farm from time to time. Whenever I can I choose trees that will never survive otherwise, and I cut them up for firewood, fence posts, or as Solstice trees to decorate our homes in December. Isabel did her own clearing, but before we say that this was "natural," we should consider that it wasn't only weak or diseased trees that fell—and storms like Isabel arise more often these

days as our species' wastes foul the air and warm the oceans. To say that the storm's destruction was a natural occurrence can be a recipe for inaction, until we consider that our urban and suburban landscapes are managed anyway.

Instead of inaction, we can do something powerful spiritually, something that will help cleanse the air and shade us during summer's ever-more-frequent hot days. I will soon get details about replanting at the labyrinth and share them in this column. Meanwhile, local residents can help replace trees in other areas around town by contributing time and money to Tree Richmond, at (804) 353-1800. This group plans to replant as many trees as possible in the coming planting season. I ask that, as the light grows stronger and we all consider our garden plans, we also give some time to the "commons" in our area—our graceful street and park trees charm tourists and residents while making all of us healthier and cooler. City Council also has some discretionary money to replant street trees; call the council member for your district if you lost a street tree. As my councilman told me, fallen trees are not given priority for replanting unless a citizen makes a special request.

I will end with a special thanks for a metaphorical tree that did not fall, a "skyline tree" prominent in our city for many years: The Aquarian Bookshop. Thanks to Pat and Kent for all they've done and best wishes to Aquarian's owner—we avoided another big loss that would sap our spirits and leave another hole in the canopy. Blessed be as sun grows stronger and the seed-time of the year approaches.