

LESSONS FROM TREES

Copyright 2005 by Burdock (burdock@mac.com)

Originally published in *Whole News*; this article may be printed but may not be distributed digitally or in print without the author's permission.



High in Virginia's mountains, two American Beech trees face one another, and the pair has much to teach gardeners or anyone who alters a landscape. Since tree-planting season will soon be here, it's time to share these teachings.

The two beeches are large examples of their species, and the smaller trees around them give space so the two can spread their crowns. "Crown" is apt here; the pair reign as Lord and Lady of the grove. In fact, one tree has a prominent phallic bulge near his base, the other a vulvic opening at hers. Such shapes, Priestess of Avalon Kathy Jones writes, occur often in nature and were focal points for paleo-pagan worship honoring the vital spirit that resides in forest, field, animals, and not least of all, in us.

As I have hiked to the beech grove for spiritual and physical exercise, I have come to believe that the Lord and Lady beeches contain Dryads, or guardian spirits of the wood. In [Tree Wisdom](#), Jacqueline Memory Paterson, Arch Druidess of Glastonbury, describes the ancient Druidic belief that Dryads lived in particular trees (7). Dryads can be contacted by worshipful visitors or they can frighten away the irreverent or malicious person who enters a grove. Would that we had more of them to protect areas being devastated by suburban sprawl!

It's ironic that the Dryads of the beech grove chose the trees they did. The very features that mark the trees as Lord and Lady and the beeches' crooked trunks would have marked them for destruction in a more "managed" forest or home-owner's yard. Yet the two trees stand tall and show no signs of decline. The opening in the Lady is not unusual; a forester once told me that many mature trees have a hollow somewhere inside, since it is the bark, not the heartwood, that carries nutrients up the trunk. Yet many folks consider trees like the beech Dryads as "imperfect." That label, in itself, can teach us much about our hubris as a species and force us to re-evaluate what "perfect" means.

When real-estate "developers" (as if a mature forest is not already developed) cut down crooked trees and plant short-lived weaklings such as Bradford Pears, they harm not only the aesthetics of a place but its spirit. Of course we need wood to live, and I have felled trees myself, though never without an apology to their spirits. But necessary use is one thing, wanton destruction to meet some human-determined notion of beauty or utility quite another.

At a recent neo-pagan festival, a participant in my class about trees mentioned a significant other who hates pine trees and wants to cut down every one in their yard. I have met other people who hate locusts, sweet gums, even beeches, whose roots "get in the way" of a riding mower. At such moments I choke back my rage until I can reply in a civil manner. Usually, recalling my own strong distaste for Bradford Pears is enough to humble and calm me. So if you love trees as much as I do, you might try a technique I've learned for confronting an angry person who is itching to pick up a chain saw. After your anger is manageable, ask the person why they hate a tree or a particular species, then point out the benefits it offers—improving a view, shading a home in summer or

blocking cold northwestern winds in winter, providing shelter and food for animals. If this does not work, point out how much it costs to have a tree professionally removed and how dangerous (I can attest to this) it is to "do it yourself" for anything larger than a sapling. If all else fails to sway their opinion, walk away if you must, defend the tree if you can.

Our continued lives on this good earth depend upon the other creatures who live alongside us. Without trees our species will perish. With them, our lungs fill with oxygen, animals find shelter and food, and shade gardens flourish full of exotics such as hostas and native plants such as ferns and trillium.

These lessons came from the Lord and Lady of the beech grove. Share them with others and take time, as the trees near you drop their leaves this fall, to thank them for what they provide. Finally, as you plant deciduous trees in fall (the spring is best for most evergreens) join me slowing down to hear the lessons from trees. Blessed Be this fall in your gardens.

Works Cited

Jones, Kathy. The Ancient British Goddess. Glastonbury, England: Ariadne, 2001

Paterson, Jacqueline Memory. Tree Wisdom. London: Harper Collins, 1999.