

Tulip Tree Mania

— Mark M. Braunstein, 3.25.2023



Birch tree, girdled (Credit: Mark M. Braunstein)

After living for 26 years in the Connecticut College Arboretum, I was expelled from paradise. Seeking some piece of turf akin to nature, I moved to a house that borders a deep woodland. The concept of owning a stately tree bigger and older than I still mystifies me, yet according to the town clerk the flora surrounding my new home all came with the deed. One towering oak tree whose trunk was anchored less than a car length from my front door

hovered over my home like the sword of Damocles. After every storm, the aging oak dumped branches atop my rooftop. Eventually, a large limb if not the whole dang tree might come crashing down.

Too close for my comfort, I could have covered my ass with homeowner's insurance, but money does not grow on trees and certainly not perennially. Rather than year after year, for a one-time payment I hired arborists to fell the tree. As a tree-hugger at heart, to atone for my sin I memorialize the fallen oak. Its stump now serves as its tombstone. As it lacks any chiseled inscription of birth and death dates, I tried counting its annual rings, but lost count after ninety.

Diminutive younger trees still growing in the front and backyard were planted by previous homeowners. Those more reasonable American dogwoods and Japanese maples will never loom over my rooftop, so like a king anointed with powers to grant life or death over his subjects I have duly granted them clemency.

Not in My Backyard

My backyard presents a different scenario. Another elder oak has been growing taller and wider with each passing year. Reaching for sunlight, it is also leaning toward the house. Someday it might hurtle toward the ground and avenge its fallen colleague, nipping the house with its treetop. Or in case of a forest fire, the enflamed treetop might ignite the house. I could mount a preemptive strike, but for now I have declared a truce and granted that oak tree a reprieve.

In the same spirit of royal magnanimity, I have refrained from mowing a portion of my backyard. Same as the front yard, the entire backyard was a grassy lawn typical of suburbia. After five unshorn years, that lawn

transformed into a patch of meadow. Over time, that meadow might revert to woodland. Though I will never witness that advancing forest in my lifetime, I am treated to more interesting sights than any primly mowed lawn. Wildflowers and wild raspberries now abound. Robins and catbirds pluck the ripened berries. Rabbits and sparrows seek food and take refuge in the thicket. Some saplings have sprouted up. Among the saplings sprang a big surprise.

Tulip Tree Mania

My dearest of all trees native to my corner of Connecticut is the erect and majestic tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*). Sometimes spelled as one word, its alternate spelling is the only thing compact about it. It stands out as among my region's tallest trees, towering up to 150 feet (50 m), up there with our non-native Norway spruce. The shape of tulip tree leaves resembles the outline of a tulip flower if sketched by a child's unskilled hand. Still more tulip-like, during spring its lime-yellow flowers encircled with orange bands bloom into nectar-rich replicas of its earthbound namesake. It is accorded honors as the official tree of three states, though sadly not Connecticut's.

As a child, I loved climbing trees. Once I gained a foothold on a lower limb, I often imagined never coming back down to earth. The taller the tree, the closer I dwelled in heaven. Little wonder that I gaze in awe at all tulip trees, regardless of their age or stature. I especially admire the colossal specimen that stands sentry at the entryway of Connecticut College. Three miles (5 km) from my home as the crow flies, that tulip tree had long been the closest one I knew. A half mile past that gatekeeper another equally majestic tulip tree presides over the campus of the Lyman Allyn Art Museum. Their shared cultural pedigree exalts that pair into a privileged class that extends beyond mere birthright.

Seeds of Change

Sometime in 2020, a stork or an angel or a crow or some other avian creature delivered into my backyard's budding meadow one of perhaps several tulip tree seeds. Descendants of that college gatekeeper? Who knows. I do know that in spring of 2021 one seed germinated. By early summer, I instantly recognized the sapling by its signature tulip-shaped leaves. I should have bowed down before it, but I only watered and nurtured it. Machete in hand, I regularly thrashed away the thorny brambles that threatened it. By fall of 2022, despite some browsing by deer, after just two summers it already had grown to twelve-feet (3.6 m) tall. So now I, too, have a tulip tree to claim as mine. Mine! All mine! Or so I delude myself into believing.

In reality, once it survives the many perils of youth, this tulip tree will outlive me. It hardly belongs to me at all. In spirit I more belong to it. If my dead body were so consecrated as to be buried under its canopy, its roots will claim me as its own. In deference to it if not also at its behest, I was enlisted to take up arms against another tree that loomed over this sapling.

Picture this. My backyard abuts a tract of deciduous forest of the Waterford Land Trust that is populated densely with beeches and birches and sparsely with young maples and old oaks. A tumbledown stonewall marks my yard's porous perimeter. On my side of that wall, a mature birch tree grew in solidarity with countless other birches outside that wall.

The human power to rationalize is boundless. I rationalized that the walled-off birch tree contributed nothing to the biodiversity of the woodland whereas the tulip tree could. That the birch's roots absorbed the same nutrients and its branches reached toward the same sunlight as do the tulip tree's. And that competition could only stunt the growth of that vulnerable

sapling. If a Wild West sheriff were in cahoots with me, he would intercede on behalf of the tulip tree. With his pistols drawn, he would warn the birch tree that this forest is not big enough for the two of them.

Hitting a Snag

Hiring a professional arborist to axe that single birch would make too much sense. To make my life difficult, I chose to use my own two hands to create a snag. "Snag" is a loathsome name for a dead tree still standing. Snags contribute to the health of the ecosystem by providing habitat and food for insects and birds alike. While that's a loss of one birch tree amid a forest teeming with birch trees, that's a win for the insects, the birds, and the tulip tree. And enjoying the presence in my backyard of a flourishing tulip tree and of abundant birds would be enormous wins for me.

How, then, to create a snag? An instructional video might show the way. Bypassing Google, I poked around the internet by peeking through the peephole of YouTube. What keywords to search YouTube? "How to chop down a tree" or "How to cut down a tree" rendered many results, but none useful. "How to create a snag" left me emptyhanded. I hit pay dirt with "How to kill a tree." Shunning the use of any toxic herbicides that could poison the insects who in turn would poison the birds, I learned how to girdle a tree. To Girdle: "To cut through the bark all the way around a tree, typically in order to kill it."

The Ax Murderer

Here's how. With a saw, you carve a two-inch-deep (50 cm) incision around the entire circumference of the tree, and then carve a second circular cut several inches below or above the first cut. You may wonder about the need for the second circumcission, but better not to question the voices of

authority that pontificate from YouTube. Lastly, between the two parallel saw cuts, with an ax you chip away the bark and underlying fleshy layer of cambia.

Mano-a-mano, armed with bow saw and hand ax, I engaged in hand-to-hand combat. The tree put up stiff resistance. It long held its ground against my attack, but I persevered. Sawing at an awkward angle exhausted this crippled old man. One circular incision was enough for one day. Sap seeped out like tears from weeping eyes. The sap promptly attracted flying insects, as they say like flies to honey. Crawling ones, notably ants, soon followed. By sunset the flow ceased and the sap congealed. The next day, I returned to the scene of the crime to inflict the second circumcision. That, too, exhausted me, so again was enough for one day. The third day, I hacked away the bark and cambia between the two saw lines, forming a single girdle.

I completed these Shakespearean unkindest cuts in March of 2022, but my right arm and shoulder ached long after. My soreness served as a vengeful and visceral reminder of my unprovoked assault. Nursing my self-inflicted wound, for my next move I sat on my duff. I waited. Some trees take as long to die as we humans take to live. To deliver my fatal blows, I labored for three days. To fatally succumb, my victim languished for nine months.

Witness to the Execution

Posing as an innocent bystander, I witnessed the tree's slow but inexorable decline. For two months, nothing perceptible happened. In June, while still retaining their natural green color, leaves began to wither. Had I not been expecting it, I might never have noticed the withering. In July, the leaves turned yellow-green. By mid-August, many yellowing leaves had fallen, most evident at the treetop. During September, gusts of wind prompted waves of

leaves to flutter to the ground, stripping the treetop bare. By late October, when other nearby trees gleamed in colorful and full regalia, the weakening boughs had shrugged off all their leaves. The birch tree stood naked before me. If bereft of leaves for an entire growing season, trees can still recover the next year, as occurred in my neck of the woods when an infestation of gypsy moths defoliated the oak trees. A question hung in the air. When might a coroner pronounce the birch tree dead at the scene? Or do I press my ear against the trunk to listen for a pulse?

On warmer days during January of 2023, chickadees and nuthatches frequently poked around the birch's twigs and branches. Downy woodpeckers nearly as small as sparrows regularly jabbed its trunk and limbs, while piliated woodpeckers as large as crows occasionally probed exploratory pecks. All were telltale signs that unseen insects had taken up residence. In February, a rogue polar vortex that had wandered far from its Arctic home blasted New England with historic subzero temperatures and angry high winds. A volley of newly liberated limbs and branches came tumbling down.

The Eternal Return

In the Boy Scouts, I learned what trees were suitable for chopping down for firewood. Those four D's from my boyhood still resound in my adult mind. Dead, Diseased, Damaged, or Dwarfed. Gathering the limbs and branches, I can certify that they indeed were deadwood worthy of this aging Boy Scout's campfire. Perhaps also fit for feeding the birch tree's own funeral pyre.

Sacrificed upon the altar of forestry expediency, the now lifeless birch tree stands as a testament to my human arrogance. Over time, more limbs and branches will fall victim to gravity, leaving only a stark-naked trunk. When its rotting mainmast eventually topples, it just might crash upon my beloved

tulip tree, in which case both of their downfalls will testify to my human stupidity. But should the tulip tree survive that trunk's collapse and any other calamity that nature might throw at it, then long after I am dead and buried my beloved tulip tree will serve as my living memorial.

Until, after a succession of homeowners after me, one family fears the tulip tree will come crashing down onto the house, and so chops it down.

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