

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

The Perfect Tree

by Eileen Stegemann

We spotted the perfect tree. It was our second time passing through the area and we must have missed it on the first go-round. Despite the fir tree's obvious lopsidedness and rather sparse branches, we all agreed it would look great in the house. Besides, we'd had many a Charlie Brown tree over the years and once we put them in the corner and decorated them, they looked spectacular. So, we took out the saw, cut down the tree and carried it back to the house.

This was our 26th year picking out a tree together (our 21st with kids) and we looked forward to this outing. It was a chance to be outside and reconnect with nature and each other.

My husband and I first did this when we were living in a small, dilapidated farmhouse outside of Watertown, New York. That winter was brutal with snowdrifts over my head (I kid you not!), but it was our first Christmas together and the thought of trekking into the woods to cut our own tree was exciting. Bundling ourselves up so that only our eyes were exposed, we headed out. The wind was howling, pummeling us with blowing snow, but we didn't care because we were young and hardy. Forty-five minutes later—whining because I couldn't feel my hands or feet, and mumbling why the heck were we out here anyway—I “convinced” my husband that the scraggly thing before us was indeed the perfect tree. What amazes me now, is that a family tradition was born out of this experience.

When kids arrived, we had to change our tradition. After carrying a screaming

baby on our backs, we realized we needed to make this outing more kid-friendly. The next year we went to a local tree farm that had wagon rides and refreshments. We still got to pick out and cut our own tree, and had tons of fun doing it.

For a few years, when our young son had mild asthma, we had to forgo a real tree in the house for an artificial one. During this time, we still kept up the tradition of our woods walk. Instead of cutting a tree, we'd gather fresh boughs to decorate the porch and get that great pine smell.

Our annual outing was not so much about the tree, but about being outside together enjoying nature. At a time of year when you are more likely to hunker inside where it's warm and dry, getting a tree or some boughs was a good excuse for an outdoor excursion. And my husband and I used these trips as opportunities to teach our kids about nature, hopefully passing along our enthusiasm for the woods and its inhabitants. We'd point out different tree species, follow tracks, and even examine scat. Over the years, we've seen some pretty amazing things, from otter tracks to piles of feathers and fur, remnants of some predator's meal. On one outing, we witnessed a weasel chasing a rabbit in the deep snow. We watched for several minutes as the two zigzagged across the yard before the rabbit managed to elude its pursuer. It was like a scene from National Geographic, and something we often recount.

After the holidays, we temporarily move our tree onto the deck where it continues to provide us with pleasure.

It becomes a haven for numerous bird species that use it for cover and explore it for any delectables they can find. Some years we string popcorn and cranberries, which really delight our feathered friends.

When I was young, my parents would sometimes buy a balled tree to plant in the yard after the holidays. I always thought that was a great idea, but never could get organized enough to do that. Instead, we obtain our tree locally—from our own property, or from a tree farm or stand—and then plant a seedling each Arbor Day. A couple of those seedlings are now taller than 15 feet, providing us with another kind of lasting enjoyment.

With both kids in college now, our family tradition is evolving again. Fortunately, we all still look forward to our outing, but as both kids are currently studying environmental sciences, they're now teaching us a few things about nature. I know we will continue to enjoy our winter search for the perfect tree, and look forward to some day introducing our family's next generation to the joys and wonders available during winter in upstate New York.

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