

Arbor Day



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National Arbor Day is celebrated each year on the last Friday in April – which in 2009 is on April 24. This observance encourages tree planting and care, as well as increasing the public's awareness of the importance of trees.

Trees provide many aesthetic and environmental benefits. They can be a beautiful addition to gardens and parks, but also are essential in generating oxygen and reducing CO₂. When planted in the proper place they can provide protection from the wind, reduce noise pollution or keep buildings cool in summer. Trees are essential for food and shelter for many birds and other wildlife. Humans use trees for paper, firewood, building materials and various products such as cork, dyes, perfume, medicines, chewing gum, soap and much more.

A Nebraska journalist was the founder of Arbor Day over a century ago. Originally from Detroit, Michigan, Julius Sterling Morton (1832-1902) and his wife Caroline moved to Nebraska City, a part of the mostly treeless prairie that was then the Nebraska Territory, in 1854. There he spent his long and productive career working to improve agricultural techniques in Nebraska. As editor of the Nebraska City News it was easy for him to spread agricultural information and his enthusiasm for trees to a wide audience. Morton felt that both the landscape and economy of his adopted state would benefit from the wide-scale planting of trees. He planted many orchards, shade trees and wind breaks on his own farm and encouraged others to do the same. He served as Secretary of the Territory of Nebraska from 1858 to 1861, and in 1869 helped organize the Nebraska State Horticultural Society. After that he became a member the State Board of Agriculture and eventually its president. When he later served as President Grover Cleveland's Secretary of Agriculture (1893-1897) he expanded his efforts to the rest of the United States as well.

In early 1872, the Nebraska State Board of Agriculture accepted his suggestion "to set aside one day to plant trees, both forest and fruit". On that first Arbor Day held on April 10, 1872 over a million trees were planted. A second Arbor Day was held in 1884, and the following year the state made it a permanent legal holiday – selecting April 22, the day of Morton's birthday. Eventually the idea spread beyond Nebraska, with several Midwestern states all proclaiming their own Arbor Days in the next decade, and all states eventually proclaiming their own days.



Manitowoc Co. MGVs plant a tree.

In 1970, President Richard Nixon proclaimed the last Friday in April as National Arbor Day, and most states have chosen this day or other dates in April. However, some states observe Arbor Day at times that are more suitable for tree planting in their areas. Celebrations are held as early as January in



Arbor Day is for tree maintenance as well as planting.

some southern states (Florida is the third Friday in January), and as late as May in some northern regions (Alaska is the third Monday in May; Vermont and North Dakota are both the first Friday in May). A few states observe Arbor Day at completely different times: Hawaii celebrates on the first Friday in November and South Carolina has chosen the first Friday in December! Some states expand to more than a single day. For example, California celebrates Arbor Week from March 7 to 14; Oregon is the first full week of April; and Maine is the third full week in May.

In Wisconsin this historic holiday has been celebrated since 1883. Each year Wisconsin's Governor issues an Arbor Day proclamation. Like most of the nation, it is celebrated on the last Friday of April as part of Forest Appreciation Week and in conjunction with Earth Day.

The concept even went beyond the U.S, with many countries establishing their own Arbor Days or similar celebrations: The UK has National Tree Week in November; Japan celebrates Greening Week; Israel has New Year's Day of the Trees; and Korea has a Tree-Loving Week. In India there is a National Festival of Tree Planting, while Spain celebrates its Tree Festival on March 26, the anniversary of the day in 1895 when King Alfonso planted a pine tree near Madrid.

The same year of the second Arbor Day, the National Education Association recommended that Arbor Day be observed in schools to educate children about the value of planting trees. In Wisconsin, students celebrate Arbor Day by reading poetry, designing posters, listening to speeches and learning about the environment and our natural resources. The culmination of the week-long activities for many is actually planting trees. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources sponsors a statewide Forest Appreciation Week writing contest for fourth graders and an Arbor Day poster contest for fifth graders with a different theme each year.



A mix of conifers and deciduous trees.

Arbor Day is a great time to focus on the trees on your property and plan for the future. Not only can you plant a tree, if it fits in your landscape plan, but also take some time to evaluate the health of the existing trees. Would a new tree improve your yard's appearance, or provide wind protection or offer cooling shade in summer? Do any of your trees need pruning or pest management for insect or disease problems?



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This is also a good opportunity to look beyond the personal, and join with others to plant or maintain trees that will make a real difference in your community. Many local civic organizations and other groups plan activities or events to celebrate Arbor Day. In some states, memorial



Celebrate Arbor Day at a group activity or event.

trees and groves are planted as living monuments to men and women who died serving their country. This day (or week in some places) can be dedicated to tree planting ceremonies, programs for care of trees by individuals, schools or youth organizations, and educational events to teach others about the value of trees and the range of species suitable for the local conditions.

Today Morton's home in Nebraska City – Arbor Lodge – is open to the public as part of a state historical park that includes an arboretum and extensive landscaped grounds. His adjacent farm is now “Arbor Day Farm”, operated for the benefit of the National Arbor Day Foundation, a national organization that promotes this holiday and trees in general. Every year they have a promotion to give out trees (white pine in 2009) to anyone who becomes a member during the month of March. In 2008, the Arbor Day Foundation, with support from Toyota, launched a new Facebook application called Tree Planter, where users can send “virtual” trees to friends for \$1. The Foundation then plants a real tree in needy forests around the country.



Plant a tree for the future!

– Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin - Madison

Additional Information:

- The Arbor Day Foundation – the official website for Arbor Day, at www.arborday.org, includes information on tree varieties and facts, Arbor Day facts and information, current events, and multiple resource links.
- Wisconsin's Arbor Day Proclamation – at dnr.wi.gov/forestry/education/pdf/ArborDayProc.pdf
- Facebook's Tree Planter – at apps.facebook.com/treeplanter/