

Cottonwoods for a Better Future

Maybe you've heard. As unlikely as it seems, trees may be our saviors. Researchers have determined we could plant 2.5 billion acres of new trees without losing an inch of farmland or cutting back at all on urban sprawl. Those billions of trees—take a deep breath here--can sweep up and away 200 gigatons of the carbon that's warming us dangerously. As Margaret Renkl said in a recent *Times* Opinion piece, "Planting trees. . . could go a long way toward saving us from ourselves."

If that's true, and if we start, then I hope--I really do--that more than a few are cottonwoods.

Now, I know people--farmers mainly—who are darned well sure that cottonwoods are just triple-x weeds. I get that. Cottonwoods grow like hybrid corn, yield a wood so soft it's hardly worth burning, leave yards trashed in every season, and, out here at least, sometimes look martyred, branches broken and bent from endless seasonal weather wars.

In winter, they're naked as jay birds, looming giant skeletons in the grove. Speaking of winter, cottonwoods haven't a clue about seasons--they snow in summer, leaving fussy cotton-ny trash through hill and dale. They're messy as two-year olds, even the ancient, barrel-chested ones that take up half the yard.

Whether, as a species, they Hoover-up carbon is a question I can't answer, but in many ways cottonwoods were long ago already our saviors out here, where, often as not, they were the only tree anywhere--the only silhouette, huge angular buoys in an ocean of grass. Native people turned cottonwood groves into prayer rooms. Wherever two or three poplars are gathered, wagon trains considered them rest stops because there had to be water nearby.

Cottonwoods do best near water. A friend of mine who knows such things, once told me that cottonwood seeds require a good soaking to germinate, need floods in fact, do well in them, can't live without them. On LaFrambois Island, east of Pierre, you can't miss dozens of newly-planted cottonwoods, each preciously

fenced in. Ever since the Missouri's dam system controls flooding--mostly--those baby cottonwoods need to be planted, not created as they'd been for thousands of years.

Did I mention the bark?--amazing stuff, beautiful in its own gruff way, thick and ribbed and rumbly. Woodcarvers peel it away from dying cottonwoods because it carves up soft as clay, I'm told.

And cottonwoods talk, well, whisper anyway, when their triangular leaves rustle in the wind. Oaks may be more sturdy, elms and ash more functional. But no one else in the breezy grove turns tambourine like a cottonwood.

Big blue stem grass doesn't reign over Siouxland as it once did. Today, corn and soybeans cover the earth here. It may be that nothing that grows up from our blessed Loess soil is as great a presence as our mammoth cottonwoods, towering above farm groves, stand-alone giants like royalty across empty fields, broken figures whose battered branches make them heroic.

Buffalo loved rubbing up against that unmistakable bark. Lonely cottonwoods in all that prairie land would often be flooded by a moat of buffalo fur three feet deep, left behind when some wandering herd rubbed itchy sides up against all those furrows.

There's one growing in our flower garden right now--three feet tall maybe, a single buggy whip of a tree, a little quaking aspen cottonwood. Really should go. Really should get pulled. It's not supposed to be there. Really, it's a weed.

But it's a weed with a grand history, a weed that wants a chance to grow. Besides, just look what they've done for us.

And we need trees. Research says they're our best shot against global warming.

I got to let it live. Might as well hold back the wind. Might as well draw the curtains on all that open sky. Might as well let that little cottonwood alone.

Let it be, just let it be.