

## **What Does a Tree Do for Me?**

**By Matea Gordon, Lawrence Co. Conservation District**

“Kids, are you ready to go to work?” my dad would ask my three siblings and I at the dinner table during many summer evenings when we were growing up. I recall being about 5 years old at the time, and I was always excited to be daddy’s helper. Our “work” involved dragging water hoses as far across the field as we could, then filling buckets with water, and carefully going down the rows of pine trees to give them a much needed drink of water in the summer heat. The trees were tiny little sticks – and we knew they needed that precious water if they were going to grow and survive to become the windbreak we wanted on the edge of our farm.

Summer after summer if we didn’t get timely rains, my siblings and I would repeat this watering ritual with dad. Sometimes we’d have to go pull weeds along the tree rows as well – which was definitely not as fun as watering. But my dad would remind us that our job was important because trees were important.

And, amazingly, with all that effort, as I grew – the trees grew, too. And so did my appreciation for trees. Today, the many trees we’ve planted are now taller than I am, and as I reflect on what trees do for me, three C’s come to mind.

The first C is Comfort. When I think of trees, I smile at the idea of sitting under a big shade tree on a hot day, or hiking among the gorgeous pine and aspen

trees near my home in the Black Hills. I also see my family gathered together around our Christmas tree celebrating traditions and making memories. Yes, trees bring me comfort.

Additionally, trees in our windbreak bring us comfort by blocking the wind to protect our farmstead, and trees hold back snow from our driveway in the winter months. Trees also shade our livestock in the summer and give them shelter during storms. And, trees offer important year-round habitat to provide birds, insects and wildlife shelter and comfort.

Trees also keep all of us comfortable by providing lumber for buildings, furniture and firewood. And, let's not forget the many comfort foods we enjoy from trees – apples, oranges, cherries, walnuts – and even chocolate is derived from the cacao tree.

The second C that trees offer me – and you – is Conservation. The big beautiful branches from trees give off oxygen, which helps clean our air. Trees also capture dust and airborne particles which help reduce smog. You could say trees are the lungs of our planet.

Trees also store carbon which is helping reduce the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. And, we can't forget the massive underground root systems of trees, which helps hold soil together and prevent erosion and landslides.

Finally, I want to remind you of a third important C provided by trees – and that C is Calm. Take a second to think about your favorite tree memory – maybe it’s the scent of pine trees, or a tall cottonwood with its leaves shimmering softly in the summer breeze. Perhaps it’s the bright yellow aspen leaves dotting the hillside in the fall. As you thought of these scenes, did you feel yourself relax? It’s possible. Research shows that within minutes of being surrounded by trees our blood pressure drops, our heart rate slows and our brain wave patterns slow down.

Trees are calming. They also absorb and block sound, and soften the harsh outlines of city buildings and pavement. Trees can inspire us: to spend time outdoors, to marvel at their network of branches, and to enjoy their colorful displays throughout the seasons.

Most importantly, during this unusual Covid-19 pandemic and time of social distancing, trees have provided a calming metaphor for strength. After listening to the national news one night and hearing challenging stories about the coronavirus and increasing death toll among American’s the anchorman closed with a quote by J. Willard Marriott who said: “Good timber does not grow with ease, the stronger the wind, the stronger the trees.” And he concluded, “We are a nation of good timber.” This reminded me to appreciate the family roots and foundation I have, to be a strong trunk that others can lean on, and to stretch my branches skyward in the anticipation of better days ahead.

So, to answer the question “What does a tree do for me?” A tree provides Comfort, Conservation and Calm. And, just as I learned all those years ago watering tiny little trees with my dad and my siblings: May we always remember: time spent among trees is never time wasted. A tree makes our world a better place – for me and you, for today and tomorrow.