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Reese Halter: Christmas a perfect time to appreciate trees

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It is appropriate that the most recognized and celebrated day of the year – Christmas – the birth of Christ, is also focused around trees.

Trees are truly remarkable.

Urban trees provide a healthy environment for people and animals. Urban trees and forests remove air pollution and smog; and they save communities millions of dollars a year by stabilizing storm-water runoff. Moreover, urban trees reduce energy costs for both heating and cooling by some 40 percent in our homes and buildings.

In the wild, our forests provide massive watersheds all throughout western North America that support 55 million people. Those mature subalpine forests help retain snowfall in the winter and slowly release meltwaters in the springtime that recharge reservoirs. Hundreds of billions of tree roots provide the most effective form of water filtration known to humankind.

Wild forests in California's Sierra Nevada supply almost 90 percent of the freshwater for the most intensive agricultural system on the planet, 38 million people's daily drinking water, the eighth-mightiest industrial economy on the globe and tens of millions of tourists who visit our state each year.

Trees provide scrumptious spices, including cinnamon – known to lower our blood sugar.

Trees grow incredible fruits, like apples with apple-skin being one of the highest recognized natural fibers that helps prevent colon cancer. In California, trees provide us with lemons, oranges and grapefruits; and we grow more almonds than anywhere else in the world.

And let's not forget that California is also a world leader in producing avocados – rich in Omega-3s that help preclude coronary disease.

Trees produce potent medicines. From the South American cinchona trees, the drug quinine was derived to help fight malaria. From the Pacific Northwest yew tree came Taxol – the billion-dollar blockbuster that offers hope to those afflicted with breast, ovarian and lung cancers, coronary disease, even AIDS. From the Chinese camptotheca trees, camptothecin is being tested for use against breast, prostate, pancreas, ovarian, leukemia, and lymphoma cancers as well as melanoma.

Interestingly, scientists have known for at least the past couple of decades that old trees are particularly important. In fact, the largest single-stemmed tree – General Sherman – a Sierra Nevada Sequoia, is likely still the fastest-growing tree on the planet, adding every year the equivalent volume of wood in a tree 1.5 feet thick and 60 feet tall.

Incidentally, the tannic acid present in the near-fireproof bark of Sequoias is the same chemical used in many fire extinguishers.

The oldest single stemmed tree, a bristlecone pine named Methuselah, lives in east central California on the White Mountains, almost two miles above sea level in an extreme environment. He's over 4,500 years old and the tree rings he lays down, almost every year, assist climate scientists in comprehending how life is adjusting to climate change.

Research has found that the conversion of Pacific Northwest old-growth forests to young fast-growing forests did not decrease atmospheric carbon as compared with old-growth forests, which capture and store vast amounts of CO₂. In other words, old growth forests are invaluable, massive living carbon warehouses.

Urban trees also play a crucial role in our towns and cities – in one year's time – one mature tree gives off enough oxygen for a family of four while at the same time urban trees help suck the rising greenhouse gas CO2 out of the air.

At Christmas consider buying a live tree and celebrate the holidays with friends and family, then celebrate the magnificence of your living tree by planting it in your yard.

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