

We are unable to supply this entire article because the publisher requires payment of a copyright fee. You may be able to obtain a copy from your local library, or from various commercial document delivery services.

From Forest Nursery Notes, Summer 2009

**63. © A century of planting trees: musings on one hundred years of research.** Janzen, H.H. Canadian Journal of Soil Science 89(3):247-254. 2009. Musings on the occasion of the centennial of the Lethbridge (Alberta) Research Center and the history and effect of tree planting

# A century of planting trees: Musings on one hundred years of research

H. H. Janzen

*Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada T1J 4B1. Received 10 September 2008, accepted 9 February 2009.*

*Generations passe while some trees stand, and old  
Families last not three Oaks*

Sir Thomas Browne<sup>1</sup>

*Let me desire and wish well the life  
these trees may live when I  
no longer rise in the mornings ...*

Wendell Berry<sup>2</sup>

Deep in the moldering archives of the Lethbridge Research Centre lie the near-forgotten treasures – diaries and journals from the Centre's early days, a century ago. Their fading scrawls reveal more than cold data and sterile facts; they show us people and tell their stories. I read through some of these documents, now dog-eared and stained, on the approaching centennial of the Lethbridge Research Centre. One thing astounded me above all else: the emphasis, the urgency, the priority given to planting trees. Over and over are references to tree planting<sup>3</sup>:

*Miles and Wiles planted cottonwoods on orchard  
border ... Charlie planted trees. ... May 5, 1909*

*Avins and Roberts planted ash trees all day. April 25,  
1908*

*Four men with team went to river bottom for trees ...  
Men got over 5600 trees from river bottom. April 23,  
1913*

*Paris and six men were planting trees April 26, 1913*

So when Superintendent William Fairfield<sup>4</sup> issued his first report in the spring of 1908, he mentions in passing that “No spring crops were sown [in 1907]”, but he enthuses about the newly planted apple trees, 551 in all, and exults in the “very fine collection of ornamental trees and shrubs consisting of 284 varieties in all ... set out.” From these early plantings, the grounds of the Lethbridge Research Centre are now a verdant forest, with trees almost a century old, including the stately Fairfield tree, a towering, majestic poplar<sup>5,6</sup> (Fig. 1).

Planting trees was a priority then; it is a priority still today. Over the years, new trees have been added, and to mark the Centre's centennial, the Honorable Minister

Strahl planted yet another, a small sapling, descendent of the Fairfield poplar, that stands now next to its progenitor.

Why do trees so fascinate us? What is their allure? Why do we plant them so devotedly? For aesthetics? – certainly, for we admire their form. As windbreaks? – indeed, for we can use all the breaks from wind we can muster on these blustery prairies. But there is, I think, a deeper reason – more subtle, more visceral. I think we plant trees because ... they outlive us, they outlast us, they connect us across time. We sit in the shade of trees planted by those long gone, and the trees we plant today will be canopy to generations we will not know. Trees are our stand-ins, our proxies in a world beyond our time; they are our living legacy.

In that way, planting trees is very much like the work we do in agricultural science. Indeed, planting trees may be an engaging, evocative metaphor for the work we do. So that is the theme I ponder in this essay: planting trees as a metaphor for a century of research, the one past and the one now coming. I proffer five ways that planting trees is like our research, thinking specifically about the work done (and still to do) at the Lethbridge Research Centre, but hoping these musings apply also to research ventures elsewhere.

I hasten to admit that these meandering contemplations may be biased and fragmented – distorted and discolored, regrettably, by ignorance. My intent, though, is merely to offer some glimpses into the century past, and through these, as windows, peer into the waiting future. For though warped and clouded, these windows still illuminate; as the poet says<sup>7</sup>:

*... We owe the future  
the past, the long knowledge  
that is the potency of time to come.*

## Planting Trees is Risky

*Only he who has planted a pine grove with his own  
hands ... can appreciate how easy it is to fail ...*  
Aldo Leopold<sup>8</sup>

The first of the parallels between planting trees and agricultural research is this: planting trees is a risky venture. Gently, carefully, we place the tender twiglets into the cold earth, hoping for rooting and growth, but