

## OUT ON A LIMB

Tracey Hall

“It’s time you take that,” Mom said pointing to a heavy box on the floor. She was downsizing and could no longer store memorabilia dating back to my third grade report card. My visit was coming to an end, so I sealed the box with packing tape and mailed it to my home in Flagstaff.

When the box arrived, I excitedly took my husband down memory lane, showing him the Red Cross card and pin I received after taking a swimming class in 1967. As I dug through text books and old letters I finally pulled out the *piece de resistance*. “Wanna see my leaf collection?” I asked. Being a good sport, my husband obliged and looked through the thick binder of dried leaves I had collected for a college dendrology class. Properly impressed, he said, “I didn’t know you were so into trees.”

I became increasingly animated as I recalled facts from class. “Did you know there are over 100,000 tree species in the world? Half of them live in the rain forest but only 1% live in the U.S. and Canada.

Deciduous trees generally have broad leaves that, like seasonal employees, are “let go” in the fall. Conifers with their waxy needles are better suited to the cold and drying winds of the west and their conical shape allows them to shrug off snow. Leaves are the main feature used in tree guides for identification. Their size, shape and arrangement on

the branch, as well as their margins help distinguish one species from another. Leaf margins, or edges, vary from the smooth margin of dogwood trees, to the serrated or jagged margin of the birch. Did you know trees can be identified in winter with just a twig? Isn't that cool?" By this time Jim had turned back to his lunch, but he was clearly amused.

In the box, too, was a smaller notebook filled with descriptions of cone-bearing trees, their Latin names and hand-drawn maps of their ranges. Truly a hands-on class, Dr. Beckjord brought in armloads of plant material for us to inspect. My classmates and I walked the University of Maryland campus looking at trees and jotting down notes. In addition to the character of the leaves, we noted the size and form of trees, the color and texture of their bark and the presence of seeds or fruits.

Frederick, Maryland, my hometown, is situated in the central hardwood forest region and city streets are shaded by the great arms of maple, beech and elm. One September visit, too early for fall color, my attention was turned downward. I was amazed by the number of husks, nuts, and seeds that littered the path through the city park. Acorns varied in color and shape, some were striped, and others glossy, some were nearly enclosed by their cups, or caps, while others barely held on to their hats — all indicative of the particular species of oak from which

they fell. Yellow-green bitternut husks lay scattered on the ground and the winged seeds of sugar maple, known as double samara, spun like helicopters through the air. The beautiful fall colors of the east get all the press but the seeds deserve an honorable mention.

My attention is brought back to the present and the view outside my window. We are surrounded by stately Ponderosa pine with their tall, straight boles and long, lustrous needles. Deciduous trees are less common in the woodlands here while the drought-tolerant Ponderosa occurs in every state west of the Great Plains. Aspen and Gambel oak, in contrast, provide spectacular fall color on the slopes of the San Francisco Peaks. Additionally, mature broadleaf trees line Flagstaff's downtown streets providing deep shade in the summer and vibrant color in the spring and fall.

That old notebook has held up pretty well over the years. Though the leaves were discolored and brittle, all but one is still glued in place. What a treasure it is to share something from my past with my husband, who I suspect, loves trees as much as I do as I hope the reader does, too.

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