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MY FAVORITE SHADE TREE AND WHY

If my favorite shade tree had been any other than a magnificent oak, I might have listened to my contractor when he said it should be cut, to give my new house proper placement on the lot.

"Build the house around the tree," I demanded.

"No use to argue with a woman," he wisely decided. So the living porch, which is at the back of the house, was narrowed at one end to allow the white oak tree to stay where it had been growing for a hundred years. I have been repaid with years of beauty, comfort, and delight. There isn't a day in the year when my tree isn't soul-inspiring and dream-provoking.

"I will lift mine eyes unto my tree", the psalmist might well have said. Many times I have tried it, and help has been forthcoming.

The winter winds buffet the ice-encrusted boughs across the roof-top, making weird and ghostly music, which is good accompaniment for the warm fireside within. All winter long the squirrels take their exercise along the sturdy limbs. Somewhere snug in the tree they have their winter home. Later, in the Spring, when the boughs are green and tender, they will build a leafy bower high in the top of the tree for their summer home.

The brilliant cardinal, the tufted titmouse, the raucous bluejay flash among the branches. The black-capped chickadee, the upside-down nuthatch, the downy woodpecker pay daily visits to the feeder fastened to the tree. Not being too sure of the faithfulness of the one who supplies the food, they "bank" the surplus in the crevices of the bark.

Early in the Spring, the venturesome robins select their nesting places. Instinctively, they seem to know that those bare branches will, as the Spring advances, be covered with leaves broad and sheltering.

Then Spring comes, and the oak with a slow but steady rhythm puts forth a pageant of colors in incomparable shades of grays and greens and mauve and muted shades of pink. There is some beauty that brings a sob to your throat. Such is the beauty of my oak in Spring.

The new leaves come on in good time, fragile and delicately formed. All too soon the foliage spreads and the leaves lose their pattern in the mass. The shade becomes dense, and my house is cooled all Summer by the mighty umbrella which the oak holds above my housetop. When its long, cool shadow falls along the garden wall, and friends drop in for tea, my tree, benign and serene, is balm for tired and jaded spirits.

If Spring is a pageant of soft, breath-taking shades, and Summer the rich cool green of massed leaves, Autumn brings the climax of the color cycle. The tree throws everything into its

paint-box for its farewell party. I am without words and do not even try to express my thoughts.

Then one day the acorns start to fall. "Bones", the baby calls them when she comes to visit and goes out in the yard. "Carry me," she insists, for they hurt her tiny feet.

I awaken at dawn and wonder why. Then a salvo of acorns hits my windows and the porch roof just outside. The flock of grackles, which has stopped over night in my oak, is leaving for another day of flight. But back to sleep I go, thankful that it is the grackles, and not I, whose day begins at dawn.

All day long the acorns come down. The car wheels crunch them on the drive. The squirrels, bewildered by so much opulence, pick and choose and discard before they stock their holes. The yard-man grumbles and calls them "messy".

Rattle, thump, bang, plop - all day and all night, until the old oak has shed its progeny. It's music to my ears, with the wind for choreographer. If I travel, I am always back home when the acorns fall.

My tree is resistant to storms, disease, and blight. Soon all over town will be heard the sound of the ax as the lovely elms, victims of a peculiar disease, must go.

My oak tree - sturdy, strong, beautiful - is good for another hundred years.