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On the shoulders of giants

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: This coastal redwood, rooted from branch tips on a millennia-old tree, is pushing out of its jar. Scientists once called such propagation for these trees impossible. (Photo courtesy of Archangel Ancient Tree Archive)

The Douglas firs that have defined our region's ecology and economy for centuries are projected to disappear from Cascadia, according to research foresters applying climate modeling. Fungal diseases such as laminated root rot have been affecting timberlands with increasing severity.

Similar keystone trees are under different threats to the south. These anticipated planetary changes are accelerating the incineration of California and southern Oregon, as readers with lungs can attest. The record-breaking fires of 2020 further jeopardized the already vulnerable giant sequoia and coast redwood populations of that region.

Michigan's Archangel Ancient Tree Archive discovers, propagates and orchestrates planting of the world's most genetically robust individual trees. For 17 years, they have been planting giant sequoias and coast redwoods in Western Washington. Their work includes producing and transplanting clones of 3,000 to 4,000-year-old giant sequoias and coast redwoods.

Once deemed scientifically impossible, this is a labor of love with an initial success rate of 3% to 4%. Their Copemish, Michigan, lab jokes that propagation is the art of not killing a plant the same way twice.

Trees that have outlived the glory of China, Greece and Rome are likeliest to thrive in a shifting climate. One redwood that Archangel clones from is the Fieldbrook coast redwood, 7 miles north northeast of Arcata, California. It was 109 feet in circumference at its base before it was felled in 1890. Legend has it that this was to satisfy a drunken wager whether one slice of the tree could seat 40 guests.

The giant sequoias Archangel is offering for transplant around Puget Sound come from either the Amos Alonzo Stagg or the Waterfall trees. These Tulare County, California, trees are around 3,000 years old and are among the largest in the world — at 155 feet, the Waterfall is the world's largest sequoia by girth.

This mission brings the best forest genetics to a region that has become even more hospitable to them than their home range. The rainwater and coastal fog that used to succor the redwoods is becoming scarcer down south, and as such these trees will thrive anywhere that Western red cedar enjoys.

Puget Sound communities from Olympia up to Everett have planted 350 coast redwoods from Archangel, at a 70% survival rate. Last Sunday, over 20 trees were distributed to several residents of Harstine Island. I will be planting my coast redwoods and giant sequoias before New Year's, and Archangel will be holding another giveaway in the first week of January.

Peninsular planting of coast redwoods has still deeper roots than Archangel's projects. In the 1970s, around 1,100 coastal redwood seedlings were planted at the Seabeck Conference Center and currently are colonizing the area. Their understory includes big-leaf maples and sword ferns, and they grow well with Western red cedar.

Because they produce a sawlog in one-third the time it takes cedar to do so, it is supposed that redwoods may become a valuable timbering resource in our region. Carpentry, lumber, furniture, siding, shingles, sheathing and fence posts are among the uses for this beautiful, rot-resistant wood. I won't be doing any of that with Archangel's champion trees.

California's native companions for redwoods include coast live oak, California buckeye and elderberry. Adjusting for Puget Sound, I will be planting mine with Garry oaks, Ashworth bur oaks, existing big-leaf maple, and wild and select cultivars of blue elderberry.

To volunteer for planting, contact Archangel Ancient Tree Archive on Facebook or email Dave Pearsall. [Email address given in the print edition.]

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

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