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The forgiving tree

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: This white mulberry is producing food before it's old enough to produce wood. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

The mulberry has been called the giving tree. Readers of a certain generation might think of Shel Silverstein's "The Giving Tree," in which a child grows up interacting with a tree that, by the time the kid is elderly, is a stump fit only to sit on in his dotage.

Had the tree in question been a mulberry, the storyline would have been different. It can afford to be a forgiving tree because it will outlive all of us and feed person and critter alike without asking for anything in return — even if the kid cuts it down.

Mulberry can be grown for coppicing, which readers may recall is cutting a tree back on regular cycles to make use of the sprouts for everything from lumber to firewood. I can't wait to practice coppicing on mine, but I wouldn't try until it has sufficient mass in a couple more years.

Coppicing has promise as a trellising method for vines, such as hardy kiwi trained into big-leaf maple. It should be easy to time harvests of any related vine around mulberry, which fruits on wood up to 2 years old.

Older mulberry wood can be braided into trellis infrastructure or cut at any point. Fifteen- to 20-year cycles are normal for coppice production. That's a lot of time to trellis vines until they can find their own feet!

Mulberry is said to work as an excellent trellis for grapes — unfortunately, I learned that after planting my grapes. I think mulberries would lend themselves to interesting weaves in a coppice plan, but any vine I have would overwhelm all but one of the mulberries.

My seedling white mulberry is growing twice as fast as my grafted mulberries, under similar light, water and soil regimes. Many Western people find white mulberries blandly sweet, though their flavor concentrates when dried.

I first encountered dried white mulberries in Persian markets and restaurants in Los Angeles. In my kitchen, they are one of the best fruits for flavoring ferments like water kefir, jun or kombucha.

I've been gobbling them off the tree, or pocketing them, forgetting and sitting on them. There are always plenty more on the tree. Birds have not been interested enough to get through the deer fence.

Have you wondered why dried mulberries are so expensive when the tree produces so copiously? As in so many cases, it's because of fidgety harvesting. Volume harvest requires manual work and stems tend to cling.

Mulberry leaf tea is used as a weight loss aid in Asia because it inhibits uptake of carbohydrates. Animal studies further tout its positive effects on inflammation, liver function, heart health and more. And if you don't judge your herbal teas according to Celestial Seasonings, you might even think it tasty.

As if all that weren't enough, the leaves also make good fodder for animals. Cattle, goats and sheep enjoy such browse, as do some chickens. Given a branch with leaves and berries, you can probably guess which the chickens eat first.

A forgiving tree indeed, hard to kill and returning every injury with generosity.

■ *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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