

# Escape to Reality

How the World is Changing **Gardening**,  
and **Gardening** is Changing the World



**MARK CULLEN**  
*with* **BEN CULLEN**



Chapter 24

# the Old Man and the Tree

*He who plants a tree*

*Plants a hope.*

—Lucy Larcom (1824–1893)



Sometimes I marvel at what one person can do. Just when I start to think, *How can I make an impact on climate change? or, I am only one person, what difference can I make?* along comes a person like Ken Jewett. I met Ken a couple of years ago, when he stepped up to the plate to help the Highway of Heroes Living Tribute. I have grown to appreciate his commitment and sincerity.

Take this story for what it is worth, and please note the last paragraph. We really should keep people like Ken in mind when we are debating the meaning of what it is to be a Canadian.



It was just a tree. Straightening his back and inspecting the hole that he had just dug, he was pleased. This would make a fine home for a maple. Not just any maple but a sugar maple. And not just any sugar maple but a sugar maple whose mother lived in the neighbourhood.

And so, it was not just a tree after all. It was a native arboreal tree whose leaves mirrored an image on our national flag. Ken Jewett was working on his farm in Brooklin, Ontario, while in his early twenties when the thought occurred to him, *I want to plant more native Canadian sugar maples. This will be my life.*

He had a lot of living to do before he would commit himself to the task. After working in the forestry business, at age forty he started his own company, Marsan Foods (they make chili for Tim Hortons, for instance). At sixty-five years old, he handed the reins of the family business over to his son Graeme and committed himself to the promotion, education, and planting of Canada's tree, the sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*).

## MAPLE LEAVES FOREVER

Twenty years later, Ken Jewett is busy every day with his charity Maple Leaves Forever (MLF). "I started MLF in 2000 with the mandate and determination to encourage the planting of native Canadian maple trees. Like any new venture it took time and patience to settle into where we are today," he explains. "We started by creating awareness of the MLF program by providing thousands of native sugar maple seedlings at local municipal public tree planting days. Later, we started planting saplings, larger trees that had a much better chance of survival."

Ken was not the first to think that this was a clever idea. In the 1880s, the Ontario government encouraged farmers to transplant sugar maple seedlings along their laneways and road allowances that were harvested from their own woodlot. They received twenty-five cents for each seedling planted, roughly a day's wages back in the day. Today, many of those same trees can be seen as you travel the rural areas of Ontario.

With today's MLF, landowners who commit to plant at least ten trees on their property (maximum fifty) can obtain stock from a list of thirteen approved nurseries and receive a 25

per cent subsidy on the purchase of each tree. There is no restriction on size. Ken explains, "Once approved online, you place your order. When you have paid your invoice, send us a copy of it and we will send you a cheque for 25 per cent of the cost of the trees."

The system is simple and straightforward. Since its inception, MLF has donated over \$2 million to the tree canopy by way of this program.

### WHY NATIVE SPECIES?

While visiting a tree farm in Ontario several years ago, Ken learned that all the grower's stock was imported from Oregon. Ken remarks, "This led us to meetings with the City of Ottawa and the National Capital Commission. Most of their maples were coming from Oregon. This turned into a seven-year frustrating challenge. We placed a half-page ad in the *Ottawa Citizen* addressed to the Governor General, the CEO of the National Capital Commission, and the mayor of Ottawa." The NCC acquiesced on their position when "tree people" objected.

### ONTARIO ENVIROTHON

MLF is a lead sponsor of Ontario Envirothon, which involves over ten thousand elementary school students. The kids are challenged to develop their own ideas and proposals to help make the province more green. Each summer a competition of the best ideas is hosted by a different city. Ontario Envirothon is organized by Forests Ontario.

### HIGHWAY OF HEROES LIVING TRIBUTE

The Highway of Heroes Living Tribute is a campaign to plant a tree for each of Canada's war dead since 1812 on the highway right of way. The Highway of Heroes runs a distance of 170 kilometres and is the busiest stretch of highway in North America. Every Canadian lost during



the Afghan conflict was repatriated at CFB Trenton and driven by hearse down the highway to the coroner's office.

When the idea of reforesting the Highway of Heroes was first hatched, Ken called Tony DiGiovanni, the executive director of Landscape Ontario, and asked if the 117,000 trees being planted were native. "Why, yes Ken. And many of them will be maples." This was all that Ken needed to hear as he stepped to the plate to make a \$25,000 commitment. That was several years ago, in the early days of the campaign. The MLF donation was a game changer for our new organization.

### WHAT MAKES US CANADIAN

When Canadians open up the debate about what makes us truly Canadian, I hope that someone will raise their hand and remind us that there are precious few Ken Jewetts in this world. Our country is a better place for him and his work.