

Beaufort's "Higher Beings"

Written by Laura Lee Rose
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One thing that truly defines the Lowcountry would be our trees: Pines, Live Oaks, Cedars, Magnolias, and Hollies. When people move here from other parts of the country, our landscape looks strikingly different because of our native trees, notably the Live Oak.

I can't remember when I first realized that I was a "tree hugger," but my respect for these higher beings grows exponentially as I understand their importance to quality of life. It isn't easy being a tree. Sunlight is a limiting factor as are space, water and nutrients. The strategy of plants, especially some trees, is to grow as fast as they can to out-compete and reach for the light. Sunlight is the energy source for all life. Water and Carbon dioxide meet in the green leaves and make sugar. It sounds simple, but this complex reaction called photosynthesis needs to be powered by an energy source 93 million miles away. Plants are also producers of the food for all animal life on this planet, directly and indirectly. They give us oxygen, without which we could not live. Trees are not only factories but engineering marvels. How do the water and nutrients get way up to the top of the tree and the sugars produced at those heights translocate all the way to grow new plant parts: roots, bark, flowers, acorns, and such? They have very well designed transportation and delivery systems.

At a recent workshop on Live Oaks, a number of local residents learned a little about the importance of Live Oak from a natural history perspective. They are a very important source of food and habitat for wildlife. The lumber was used historically for shipbuilding by the British navy. We also learned that there are a few pests and diseases that can be problematic. But these trees are tough and often take lots of abuse from development . . . and sometimes even good intentions. Changing the grade even inches can remove roots and limit the water and nutrient uptake, or smother feeder roots by reducing the oxygen available to them. Mulching around trees so that mowers and lawn equipment do not damage trunks has the added benefit of adding organic matter to the soil. Mulch is relatively inexpensive way to conserve soil moisture and suppress weeds.

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Care of growing and mature trees should be undertaken by homeowners, municipalities and professionals with regard to their value. Most of us already get the aesthetic value of trees. They are beautiful. They are anchored in a past and reach to a future. Beaufort is so blessed to have had communities and residents who valued our natural beauty, preserving and planting trees.

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