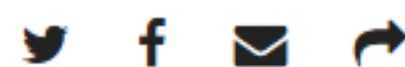


Are you a tree hugger? Don't stop there. Get closer. Form an attachment.

BY KENNETH SETZER FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

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A nap, or at least a sit, in this oak's embrace would renew mind, body, and spirit. KENNETH SETZER
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You can make friends with animals, so why not plants and trees? I've read a few accounts of people befriending trees, and at the risk of sounding hokey, it seems possible and — for people like us — inevitable to feel kinship with trees and all living things.

The stories run from the basic attachment one might form to something of beauty seen on a regular basis, to people consciously trying to communicate with and befriend a tree. But don't think this has to be a flight of fancy. We form great attachments to inanimate objects, so it only seems natural we should form feelings for plants.

I walk my dogs three times a day on the lawn, meaning I encounter a live oak at least that many times. I've found myself leaning up against it, or placing my palms on its furrowed bark. My mind often wanders like a toddler in a toy store, so thoughts come to mind like “How far do your roots extend underground?” and “What are you connected to?” And inevitably: “Are you AWARE?”

If you fear looking odd hugging or talking to trees, practice it in your yard in privacy. If you try it here at Fairchild, it's unlikely anyone will look upon you unfavorably; quite the opposite.

Here are ways and reasons to get closer to a tree:

First either sit or stand at its trunk, place your palms on the trunk, and look up into the beautiful crown.

They have much to teach us. Their stillness is something people should strive for, instead of our need to constantly run and always be thinking and fretting. The tree is there, in this moment. If it's destroyed a second from now, that has no bearing on its living to the fullest right now.

Their longevity — from less than the average human's to well beyond it up to near 5,000 years for the bristlecone pine — means to me that these creatures experience existence in a way we can't comprehend; to them, our petty worries would be incredibly insignificant.

Publications on tree communing can get very spiritual, very quickly. I tend to stay a little more practical, and focus on learning from the tree, particularly on how to pay attention, observe details using multiple senses, stay in the moment, while also letting my imagination come up with flights of fancy related to the situation — not wandering into worries or everyday tasks.

What tree to befriend? If you think about it, many of your human friends might not share tons in common with you, yet you “click” with them and enjoy each other's company. Use this intuition with trees. I always felt drawn to my live oak. It just seemed cool. Friendly, sheltering, happy to harbor Spanish moss, orchids, algae, lichen, resurrection fern, lizards, birds, ants — and I'm sure much more.

Palm trees, while fantastic, don't attract me the same way. While arguably not truly trees, palms produce foliage usually well out of reach; trees with foliage and branches closer to the level of humans put out more of a sheltering, safe vibe. Plus there'll be no falling coconuts to knock you on the head.

Drawing the tree will also help get you acquainted, or photographing it in detail and in its entirety.

One of the best experiences I've had was falling asleep beneath a tree, cuddled up to its base. It was magical, and between drifting in and out of a light sleep I could look deeply into the bark and roots, trying to discover what the ants were doing traversing that rough terrain. Sadly, napping under a tree is frowned upon in our society. Outdoor sleepers are looked at askance, with disdain even.

No matter. Find a tree with some shade, privacy, in a safe area, without fire ants, use a backpack or rolled up jacket as a pillow and let the light and shadows dancing through the branches caress you to sleep. It's the best.

While doing this I could sense the sap coursing through the tree, though at an incredibly slow rate compared to our own blood. I thought how the solar radiation created 93 million miles away was at last hitting the foliage and being turned into food, and how none of “us” would exist without that neat little process. I could imagine more vividly how the tree was vacuuming water and nutrients from the soil and air, and how it was likely connected to fungi and other trees underground. I wonder if they were talking about me.

We already know that nature and gardening are so very good for us, essential really, but getting a little closer, more involved, with a tree or trees will get you deeper into the connection we share with all life.

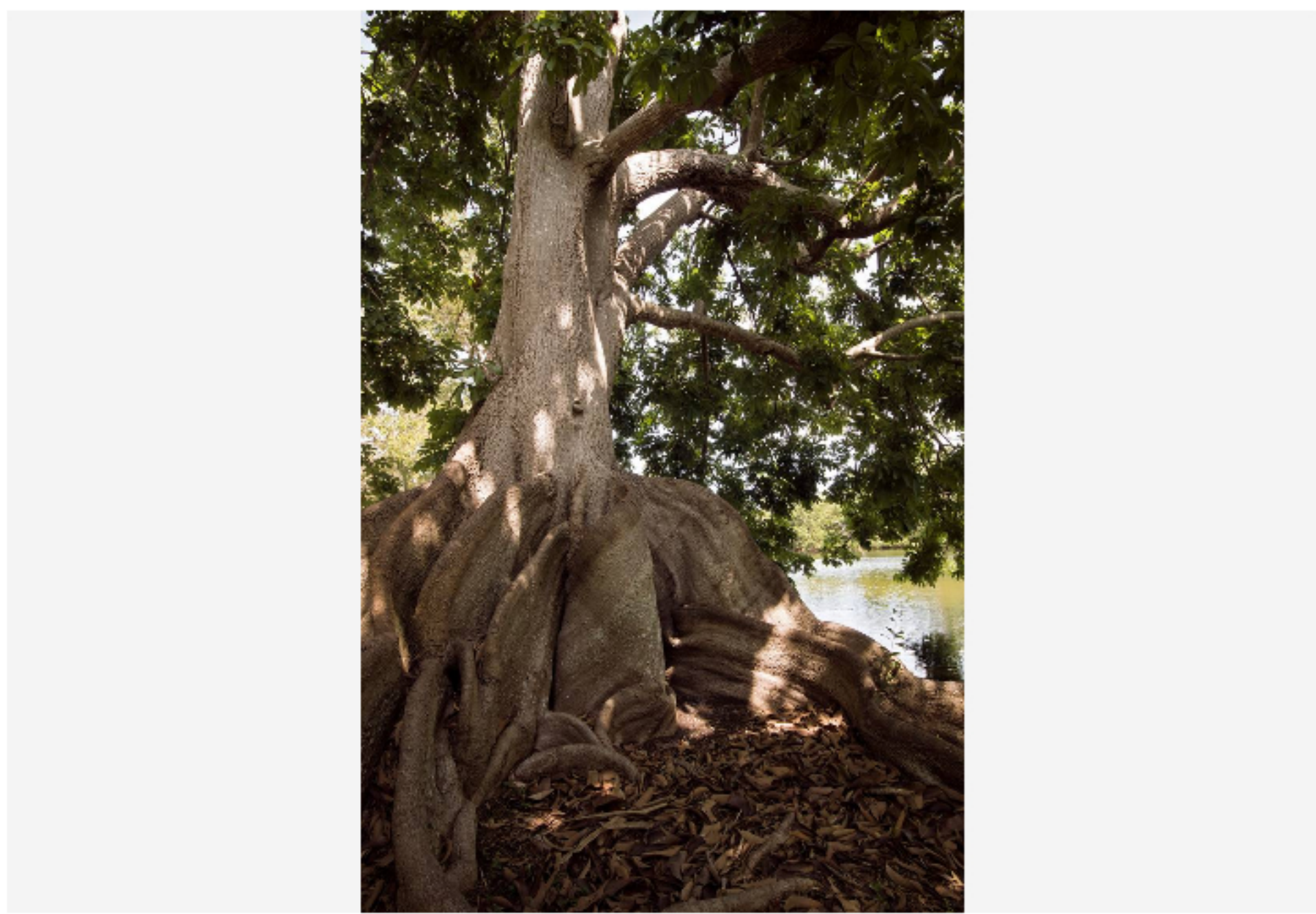
Kenneth Setzer is writer and editor at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden.



Oaks always welcome tree huggers. Kenneth Setzer
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Pine needles make a soft, springy bed. Kenneth Setzer
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This *Pachira aquatica*, aka Guiana chestnut, would make a good friend. KENNETH SETZER
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