

Why We Often Fail to Notice Trees

“Plant Blindness” and How to Cure It



Illustration by ChatGPT (AI-generated).

By Susan Mates

Most of us can recognize a squirrel, robin, or deer at a glance. But how many of us can identify the largest living organisms in our own neighborhoods? Scientists have a name for our tendency to overlook the plants around us: plant blindness.

Once, knowing trees could be a matter of survival. People needed to know which wood was strong enough to build a house, which trees produced food or medicine, and which made the best fuel, tools, fibers, or dyes. Today, many of us walk through a world filled with trees without really seeing them.

That is remarkable, because plants make up roughly 80 percent of all living biomass on Earth. They form the foundation of ecosystems and provide food, shelter, oxygen, shade, and countless other benefits. Yet even scientists and conservationists can unintentionally overlook them.

Plants make up most of the living matter on Earth, yet they often fade into the background of human attention.

What Is Plant Blindness?

Plant blindness is the tendency to overlook plants in our surroundings, fail to recognize their importance, or regard them as less interesting or important than animals.

Part of the problem is visual. Plants often blend into a green backdrop, while animals move quickly and attract our attention. Trees grow, respond, and change on a much slower timescale than humans or animals, making much of their activity difficult to see.

Our brains may also be predisposed to notice animals. Throughout human evolution, animals could be predators, prey, competitors, or companions. Paying close attention to them had immediate consequences. Plants, by contrast, often remained still and seemed less urgent. But stillness is not the same as inactivity.

Plants compete for sunlight, water, nutrients, and space. They defend themselves with thorns, toxins, and bitter chemicals. They attract pollinators with color and scent. Some communicate distress through airborne chemicals or underground fungal networks. Their lives may unfold slowly, but they are anything but passive.

What Do You Notice First?



Henri Rousseau, Surprised, 1891, National Gallery, London

When people look at this painting, many notice the tiger first. Only after looking more carefully do they begin to see the extraordinary variety of leaves, trees and plant forms surrounding it. That is plant blindness in action.

Plants sometimes break through our inattention with a showy flower, a patch of deep shade, a strong aroma, an allergic reaction, or an overgrown branch. In those moments, we catch a glimpse of the complex living world that has been there all along.

Trees Live on a Different Timescale

Trees and humans experience time very differently. A tree may take decades to mature and centuries to grow old. Its movements toward light, responses to drought, and seasonal changes often happen too slowly for us to notice. Because these changes unfold gradually, we may mistake slow activity for no activity at all.

Life Cycle of an Oregon White Oak

(*Quercus garryana*)



Illustration by ChatGPT (AI-generated).

Many Indigenous traditions understand plants as relatives, teachers, or sovereign beings rather than as scenery or raw materials. That perspective offers another way to think about our relationships with trees: not as background objects, but as living participants in the ecosystems we share.

Why Does Plant Blindness Matter?

It is difficult to protect something we barely notice.

When people fail to see trees, they are less likely to recognize their value or speak up when they are threatened. A mature neighborhood tree may disappear for a road, utility line, parking lot, or new development before many people fully understand what has been lost.

In Washington County, where development is rapidly changing many communities, mature trees can vanish one property at a time. Their disappearance may seem gradual, but the cumulative effects are significant.

Trees cool neighborhoods, slow stormwater, reduce erosion, filter air and water, store carbon, support wildlife, and make communities more livable. When they are removed, those benefits disappear with them.

Plant blindness can also influence research, education, and conservation funding. Endangered animals often receive far more public attention than endangered plants, especially when the animals are large, familiar, or visually appealing such as pandas or polar bears. Plants, though essential to nearly every ecosystem, receive only a small portion of endangered-species funding—just 1%-5% of funds allocated for endangered species, for example.

Interest in plant-related professions has also declined. Botany degrees at research universities have dropped by half and numbers of farmers are at historic lows. At the same time, climate change is increasing the need for people who understand forests, crops, wetlands, drought, wildfire, and biodiversity.

We need plant knowledge now more than ever.

This is no time to be blind to plants.

How to Cure Tree Blindness

The good news is that plant blindness is not permanent. Attention can be learned.

- **Learn five trees**

Start with the trees on your street, in your yard, or at a nearby park. Learn five common species, then build from there. Once you know a tree's name, you begin to notice its bark, leaves, flowers, seeds, shape, and seasonal changes.

You might begin with these familiar Washington County trees:

- Douglas-fir
- Bigleaf maple
- Oregon white oak
- Western redcedar
- Red alder



- **Use an identification app**

Apps such as [iNaturalist](#) and [Seek](#) can help identify leaves, bark, cones, flowers, and seeds. They are most useful when they encourage you to look closely rather than simply provide an answer.

Notice a tree's distinguishing features, such as White Oak's rounded lobes, a Western redcedar's stringy bark, or the large paired leaves of a bigleaf maple.

Naming trees is not merely a parlor trick. It is a way of learning to pay attention.

- **Spend more time outside**

Slow down and give yourself time to notice. Observe where trees grow, which ones thrive in wet soil, which tolerate drought, and which attract birds or insects. Look at the canopy, trunk, roots, fallen leaves, and the plants growing beneath them. Even a short period—just 20 minutes—in a natural setting can improve mood and reduce stress. More importantly, regular observation turns an indistinct green background into a world of recognizable living beings.

- **Keep a nature journal**

Record changes in your yard, neighborhood, or favorite park. Note the first buds of spring, the timing of flowering, changes in leaf color, summer drought stress, or the arrival of migrating birds. Try your hand at botanical drawing, or take photographs of the same tree throughout the year. A journal helps make slow change visible.

- **Become a plant mentor**

Share what you notice with someone else. A plant mentor does not need to be an expert. Simply model curiosity, close observation, and caring. Point out an unusual leaf, a tree cavity, a seedpod, or a patch of moss. Invite others to look closely and ask questions.

- **Involve young people**

Many children spend less time outdoors than earlier generations did. Helping them notice plants can build lifelong curiosity and care so that plant blindness does not persist. And there's nothing like seeing the world from a child's point-of-view. Ask a child what they see in a tree. Their answers may surprise you. Children often notice shapes, textures, colors, insects, and stories that adults overlook.

- **Take action**

Put your growing awareness to work. Join us in a guided walk, help with a restoration project, or speak up for trees in your neighborhood. Check the Treekeepers events calendar or take part in one of our partners' activities.

The world has not become less green. We have simply become less practiced at noticing it.

Every tree has a history. Every forest is alive with relationships. Every one of us can learn to see them more clearly. Today, look up into the canopy, learn the name of one unfamiliar tree, or show someone else what you have discovered. Humans are capable of remarkable botanical understanding when it is important to them.

Once you begin noticing trees, you may never see your neighborhood the same way again.



Resources and Further Reading

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