

Trees as old as time

Bonner County's 'big trees' are part of its long history

By Hannah Combs
Reader Contributor

My first spring in Sandpoint, I visited a friend at her cabin and she wouldn't let me leave without a visit to "the big tree." The property behind her home turned into a mass of creek channels during spring run-off, and she lent me thigh-high muck boots to slog through the frigid water. Clinging to shrubs, I propelled my way across, only looking up when I was on dry land again. I was standing in the shadow of the most incredible tree I had ever seen, a lone western red cedar whose fellows had been cut or fallen decades before. More than eight feet in diameter, it was stretching out into the creek, looking as though it might go for a walk at any minute. The interplay with water through the years had sculpted its lower trunk into a fantastical twisting growth of burl and roots.

Coming from the Midwest, this first encounter with a "big peckers, and old growth stands tree" was a moving experience, are resilient to forest fires with waves of pure wonder pour-because they do not support the ing over me. For those who have dense understory that provides lived their entire lives here, the fuel for the fire. imposing trees of the West may After more than a century of not be such a surprise, but they human development, pockets still inspire awe and respect. of old growth cedar can still be

As one of our native species, found close to home. Though cedars have played a role in local the Roosevelt Grove of Ancient history for thousands of years. Cedars northwest of Priest The cedar has been used by the Lake and the Ross Creek Cedar Kalispel tribe for many daily Grove just across the border in practices, from building canoes Montana are two of the most and bark baskets to smoking fish, popular places to stand among and cedar is still a popular build-these giants, cedars can be ing material, cut and milled for found all over Bonner County. everything from roofing shingles The "Grandfather Tree" to guitar soundboards. at Schweitzer is one iconic Cedar forest provides example. Nestled near the wildlife habitat for species like Springboard run in the Outback black bears and hairy wood-Bowl, the towering cedar can R



A magnolia tree in full bloom in south Sandpoint. Photo by Hannah Combs.

be discovered in the winter or summer months, though a summer hike might entail more of an expedition.

Though neither native to North Idaho nor as imposing as the cedars, the magnolia tree's history goes back much further. Known for its exquisite and ephemeral pale blooms, the magnolia was one of the earliest flowering plants, developing during the Cretaceous Period. The fossil record shows magnolias on Earth as early as 95 million years ago.

The magnolia developed some interesting characteristics throughout its ancient past. According to local gardener and BCHS Volunteer Coordinator Jacquie Albright, "The petals

of the magnolia flower are quite strong and feel thick to the touch compared to other petals." That is because the magnolia was around before bees and butterflies, so it adapted for a different pollinator. "The petals have to be strong enough to hold a beetle as it enters into the center of the flower," Albright said.

The oldest magnolias are native to eastern Asia and eastern North America — the magnolia is the state flower of Mississippi, where the record-holding largest tree stretches to 122 feet and has a diameter of more than six feet. Yet, the 200+ subspecies of the tree have adapted to a variety of climates, including that of

North Idaho. With blooms that usually appear before the leaves, magnolias always put on a stunning early spring display, which can be seen throughout our community.

Bonner County is home to a few record trees of its own. The University of Idaho Big Tree Program recognizes six Bonner County trees as the largest in the state: the Douglas maple, red alder, butternut, subalpine larch, paper birch and black cottonwood.

The record-holding subalpine larch can be found near the upper Roman Nose lake. The paper birch and black cottonwood can both be seen on the Gooby farm near the base of Gooby Road. The Sandpoint Tree Committee's "Outstanding Trees of Sandpoint, Idaho" booklet says of this black cottonwood, "This multistem giant measures 8 feet in diameter and reaches a height of 113 feet." The black cottonwood's sap was used by some Native American tribes as a glue or even for waterproofing, and today its flower buds are used in some perfume fragrances.

Whether your favorite tree is hidden deep in an old growth forest or on colorful display for everyone to see, take a moment this spring to visit your tree and stand in awe of its beauty. The history of these ancient species precedes us, and there is much to learn from their grace and resilience.

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