

# *Life's A Birch*

For anyone who's interested, Marsha and I are running a blue light special on birch logs at our home.

I should hasten to add that we don't own a tree farm or pulp mill, nor are we enamored of scorched earth policies. We merely live in a house surrounded by borer-friendly foliage. The previous resident, possibly anticipating retirement to the Sonoran Desert, selected specimens with a shelf life shorter than bologna. Result: our yard daily grows more suitable for jack rabbits.

The birches were what originally caught our eye, or hers, anyway. Marsha has a fondness for paper birches stemming from the behemoth in her parents' front yard. Her reaction on first seeing the half-dozen peeling *betula* during a drive-by resulted in a minor case of whiplash. The house might have been sided with corrugated tin, a puddle of raw sewage on the doorstep, and she'd still have bid on it.

I was more skeptical. Even if you're partial to chemicals--- which I'm not--- caring for paper birches is like paying taxes: maximum investment for minimum return. You can turn your yard into a toxic waste dump with pesticides and still lose the damned things. Over five decades my in-laws have

applied the equivalent of the Bhopal spill to their elephantine treasure, and it still looks like it needs Rogaine, the crown nearly devoid of leaves.

Nevertheless, as newlyweds heavily into compromising positions, we agreed to disagree. We bought the birches, er, house, and agreed to avoid toxins for as long as possible. With chin held high we strolled in the gloaming. Our children would thank us and nature, too, in its way.

As it turned out, nature thanked us as children often do, with middle finger extended. Birch #1, situated focally in front, fizzled faster than a sparkler, its trunk riddled with borer holes. We could almost hear it drying up, shup! like a basin emptying, as we lay in bed at night. Birch #2, over our back porch, started losing branches. Wasps the size of F16s hemstitched its girth in search of grubs, divebombing us as we walked by. The remaining four showed signs of wilting.

Obviously, this wasn't the way to go.

There are some pretty lethal poisons out there. Dysistene, for example, is guaranteed to turn you into grub food if inhaled, recreationally or otherwise. According to its label, which takes longer to read than Russian novels, it's toxic to fish, wildlife, birds, and bosses into whose brownies it's baked. You sprinkle it around the dripline and wait for the mushroom cloud to form. Not exactly a product endorsed by Greenpeace.

But better one strong dose than many weaker ones, we reasoned. So, attired as if for a space launch, I dutifully dusted the granules and watered them in. In the process I shed ten pounds through dehydration and got asked by the mailman if I capped oil wells for a living. Measures this extreme would have to bring results!

As it turned out, Dysistene did indeed have a half-life: half of two birches croaked. One of them now resembled a giant cat litter scoop. Nice for Claes Oldenbourg, maybe, but not our idea of horticulture.

In desperation we consulted some nurserymen. Their suggestions were as follows: (1) Continue dousing with pesticides till our yard glowed in the dark. This might not control borers, but would eliminate the need for outdoor lighting. (2) Whack off all the birches knee-high. The new growth, we were told, would prove borer-resistant. Unfortunately, we'd be collecting Social Security before we had shade again. And the aesthetic appeal of truncated trees, especially in winter, is limited.

Quite frankly, at this point we're, er, stumped. We really don't know how to control the borers. We'd like to plant perennial gardens around them, but landscaping around trees that may be burning in the stove next winter is sort of like pushing mutual funds in a nursing home. Maybe we should

just enjoy them for as long as we can. After all, we do have other trees in our yard.

Elm trees, for instance.