

# What Is Arbor Day?

**A**rbor Day is an annual observance that celebrates the role of trees in our lives and promotes tree planting and care. As a formal holiday, it was first observed in 1872, in Nebraska, but tree planting festivals are as old as civilization. The tree has appeared throughout history and literature as the symbol of life.

## J. Sterling Morton and the First Arbor Day

The idea for Arbor Day in the United States originated in Nebraska City, Nebraska. Among the pioneers moving into the Nebraska Territory in 1854 was Julius Sterling Morton from Detroit. He and his wife, Caroline, were lovers of nature, and the home they established in Nebraska was quickly planted with trees, shrubs, and flowers.



Morton was a journalist and soon became editor of Nebraska's first newspaper. Given that forum, he spread agricultural information and his enthusiasm for trees to a receptive audience. His fellow pioneers missed their trees and needed them for windbreaks, fuel, building materials, and shade from the hot prairie sun. A visit to Nebraska today wouldn't disclose the state was once a treeless plain, yet it was the lack of trees there that led to the founding of Arbor Day in the 1800s.

Morton wrote and spoke about environmental stewardship and the interrelatedness of life. He encouraged everyone to set aside a specific day to plant trees.

In 1872, The State Board of Agriculture accepted a resolution by J. Sterling Morton "to set aside one day to plant trees, both forest and fruit." The Board declared April 10, Arbor Day and offered prizes to the counties and individuals that

properly planted the largest number of trees on that day. More than one million trees were planted in Nebraska on the first Arbor Day. With this first tree planting holiday observance, J. Sterling Morton became known as the "Founder of Arbor Day."

## The Spread of a Good Idea

Shortly after this 1872 observance, other states passed legislation to observe Arbor Day each year with appropriate ceremonies. By 1920, more than 45 states and territorial possessions were celebrating Arbor Day. Today, Arbor Day is celebrated in all fifty states.

Throughout the world, people of all ages are planting trees, caring for them, and learning their value.

- In the United States, this tree planting festival is called Arbor Day.
- In Israel, it is called the New Year's Day of the Trees.
- Korea has a Tree-Loving Week.
- Iceland has a Student's Afforestation Day.
- Yugoslavia holds an Arbor Day in the spring and an Afforestation Day in the fall.
- India celebrates a National Festival of Tree Planting.

Most holidays celebrate something that has already happened and is worth remembering like the day someone was born or a religious holiday celebrating a past event. Arbor Day reflects a hope for the future. The trees planted on Arbor Day show a concern for future generations. The simple act of planting a tree represents a belief that the tree will grow and, some day, provide wood products, wildlife habitat, erosion control, shelter from the wind and sun, beauty, and inspiration for ourselves and our children.

## When Is Arbor Day?

For many years, Arbor Day was celebrated on April 22, J. Sterling Morton's birthday. Today, National Arbor Day is celebrated on the last Friday in April. All fifty states, Puerto Rico, and some U.S. territories have passed legislation adopting Arbor Day which is celebrated on a date appropriate for tree planting in their region. See page 24 to learn when Arbor Day is celebrated in your state.

