

Why Dogwood?



Photo: gchiang

Professor Cheng Man-ch'ing's Tree, a Chinese Dogwood, planted on April 22, 2002.

Because of the peculiarities of the site the choice of trees was limited. Of the few trees suitable to the site, Dogwood was the obvious choice.

Professor Cheng was a Master of Five Excellences; the Dogwood is a tree of five virtues: the tree is beautiful, useful, medicinal, nutritious, and humble.

On the almost naked branches the blossoms shine forth like stars, and the blossom, are borne on long flat sprays of bloom along the boughs, turning their pure faces up toward the sky with a suggestion of the most classical traditions of flower arrangement.

Lovely as it is, Dogwood stoops to be useful. The wood has an extremely high resistance to sudden shock ... For that reason Dogwood has long been a favorite for the heads of golf sticks and the handles of chisels ... The same virtue makes it useful for mauls, mallet heads, and wedges. Knitting needles and sledge runners are made of it because it wears smoother with use.

*The aromatic bark, above all the inner bark of the root, has marked bitter and astringent properties. The Indians used it as a cure for malaria.**

During the Civil War, the Union blockade caused a shortage of quinine in the South. Confederate doctors substituted Dogwood bark. Dogwood bark is also used in Chinese herbal medicine.

The scarlet berries remain on the Dogwood throughout most of the winter, thus providing much-needed food for birds and other wildlife.

Reaching a height of only twenty-five to thirty feet, Dogwood is an under-story tree. In the wild, the blooms are sparse on the bare limbs, giving the tree a delicate appearance.

—Dan

*A *Natural History of Trees* by Donald Culross Peattie, 1948 Houghton Mifflin Company

A Living Memorial

Like the sculpture that exists in a crude block of marble, this living memorial to Professor Cheng has apparently been secreted here in Riverside Park. When I found the site and saw the stump of the old tree, the idea appeared in front of me as though it had been hanging in the air waiting for someone to see it. Planting a tree was the natural thing to do.

I introduced the idea to a few fellow students, then I mentioned it to Maggie Newman; from that moment, the thing was inevitable. The process of turning the idea into reality had begun and, powered by Maggie's tenacious energy, it moved forward.

The response to the project has been overwhelming. Tai chi colleagues from Philadelphia, Baltimore, Miami, Minneapolis, New York, St. Louis, San Diego, and elsewhere expressed their eagerness to participate. To me, this indicates the enormity of the influence Professor Cheng still has on all of us. First second and third, generation students recognize the value of his contribution to their lives and wish to express their gratitude. Like the idea itself, that gratitude seems to have been present in each of us waiting for a catalyst to spark its expression. Apparently, the tree project has provided that spark.

The organic way this project has unfolded seems beyond mere coincidence. For example, when told of our choice of Dogwood, the Park Fund's horticulturist replied that the American variety was susceptible to blight, and a Chinese variety would be more suitable. The Chinese Dogwood was planted on April 22, 2002, which was Mrs. Cheng's birthday. That also happened to be Earth Day. After months of drought, the day of planting began with a steady rain, and we have had generous rainfall since.

Certainly, this was an auspicious beginning. The idea has become a living thing. It now includes a park bench with a brass plaque. It may soon include another tree. It seems to be driven by the same unseen force that urges the crocus to peek through the snow, the sparrow to weave its nest in a forked limb, and the salmon to struggle upstream.

—Dan

We wish to thank Jim Dowell and Crista Carmody of the Riverside Park Fund for their help in making this project a reality. We'd also like to thank all the students and friends of Professor Cheng Man-ch'ing who have contributed funds toward this memorial.

Here are a few comments that I received about the project that I would like to share with everyone.

—Dan

What a wonderful idea. The color copy showing the little tree was just right: I had no trouble imagining Professor beside it — but then my eyes misted over. A ringing cheer for the master, students, and thing itself!

—Robert Smith

Have a wonderful celebration ... I pray for good weather, lots of fun, great friendship, and a beautiful memory for all of us to cherish. This is very meaningful for my Dad, and for all of us in this BIG Tai Chi family. I wish I could be there too.

—Ellen Cheng

Isn't it amazing how many people's lives have been touched by a single man, whose presence is felt so strongly by those he never met.

—Anne Gricevich
Treasurer, St. Louis TCC Assoc.



Illustration: gchiang © 2002

Professor Cheng lived in a 12th floor apartment on W104th Street, in New York City. He called the west facing apartment which overlooked Riverside Park, "The Long Twilight House." In the early '70s, Ken Van Sickle filmed Professor Cheng's form at W115th Street by a tree in Riverside Park. The illustration was drawn from a still of that film. What remains today of the tree is the stump. The newly planted Chinese Dogwood, is just to the right of it. The tree is the living memorial.

—George