

Arbor Day – Celebrating More than the Tree

By

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Arbor Day is a holiday dedicated to the planting, care, and appreciation of trees. It celebrates trees' essential role in sustaining ecosystems, providing shade, producing oxygen, supporting wildlife, and enhancing urban and rural landscapes. The holiday emphasizes stewardship of the natural environment and encourages communities to actively participate in conservation and urban forestry initiatives. Over time, Arbor Day has become both a symbolic celebration and a practical opportunity to expand tree canopies and educate the public about the environmental, economic, and social benefits of trees.

The origins of Arbor Day trace back to 1872 in Nebraska, where J. Sterling Morton proposed a special day devoted to tree planting. On April 10 of that year, Nebraskans planted more than one million trees. Morton's vision quickly inspired other states and communities to adopt similar observances. Schools played a key role, as early Arbor Day celebrations often involved children planting trees on school grounds, instilling an early sense of environmental stewardship. By the late 19th century, Arbor Day had spread widely across the United States, and local variations emerged, including festivals, tree-planting campaigns, and educational programs. Arbor Day's national influence extended internationally, inspiring countries around the world to adopt similar holidays focused on tree planting and conservation.

California formally recognized Arbor Day through legislation, resolutions, and gubernatorial proclamations. The state adopted March 7 (Luther Burbank's birthday) as its Arbor Day, distinguishing it from the national tradition of celebrating on the last Friday in April. The California State Assembly and Senate approved Resolution ACR 10, designating March 7–14 as Arbor Week, and annual gubernatorial proclamations reaffirm the state's recognition of Arbor Day. California's observance reflects a longstanding commitment to urban forestry, environmental education, and tree stewardship across both public and private lands. Proclamations dating back to 1984 show the Governor's formal recognition of March 7 as Arbor Day, and contemporary proclamations continue to emphasize the importance of trees to the state's ecological and community well-being.

The selection of March 7 as California's Arbor Day is directly tied to the birthday of Luther Burbank (1849–1926), one of California's most influential horticulturists. Burbank's work in plant breeding, experimentation, and agricultural innovation helped shape California's landscape and its agricultural economy. By aligning Arbor Day with his birthday, California emphasizes not only tree planting but also the broader legacy of

horticulture, plant science, and sustainable land use. The choice of this date allows the state to integrate environmental awareness with the celebration of a historical figure whose work transformed California's flora and agricultural practices.

At the national level, Arbor Day has fostered environmental consciousness and civic participation. Millions of trees are planted annually across schools, parks, and community lands. The holiday encourages engagement from students, civic groups, environmental organizations, and municipalities, promoting the long-term benefits of forests and urban canopies. National programs like the Arbor Day Foundation expand the holiday's reach by coordinating educational initiatives, providing resources for tree planting, and advocating for policies supporting sustainable forestry. Arbor Day also raises awareness of the environmental challenges facing forests, such as climate change, urbanization, and disease, reinforcing the importance of active stewardship to sustain tree populations.

At the state level, California has leveraged Arbor Day to promote urban forestry, conservation, and environmental education. Annual proclamations from the Governor highlight the critical role trees play in clean air, shade, soil protection, and community well-being. Schools, municipalities, and non-profits are encouraged to participate in Arbor Day initiatives, often planting trees on public lands and campuses to enhance local green spaces. California's unique climate, diversity of tree species, and urban growth pressures make the state particularly invested in Arbor Day as both a symbolic and practical effort to expand tree coverage. Programs often align with school curricula, civic engagement, and local sustainability initiatives, ensuring that Arbor Day has a tangible and long-lasting impact.

In Santa Clara County, Arbor Day is a platform for both education and community engagement. The County Office of Sustainability and the Santa Clara County Office of Education partner on annual initiatives, planting hundreds of trees on school campuses, neighborhood parks, and other public sites. These programs engage students, volunteers, and community organizations, emphasizing environmental equity and firsthand learning. By planting trees on school grounds and local parks, the county enhances urban canopies, provides shade and aesthetic improvements, and fosters environmental literacy among young residents. These initiatives reflect the broader state-level emphasis on Arbor Day while tailoring programs to local needs, particularly in densely populated or underserved areas.

Within Santa Clara County, the city of Gilroy exemplifies the local impact of Arbor Day and has a rich, multilayered historical legacy. Gilroy's Arbor Day activities date back a century. In 1930, to commemorate California's first statewide observance of Arbor Day on March 7, the community of Gilroy planted approximately seventy-five deodar cedar trees

along the newly paved Hecker Pass Highway (now part of California State Route 152) west of the city. Civic organizations—including the Rotary Club of Gilroy, the Elks, American Legion Auxiliary, Boy Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, and local school children joined in the spectacle and effort. By 1931 a second planting of about sixty-five additional deodar cedars was undertaken, bringing the total initial row to 140 trees. The site now encompasses approximately 115 deodar cedars and twenty oaks, stretching 1.39 miles, and has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the “Highway 152 Tree Row.”

Beyond the initial planting, Gilroy’s commitment to Arbor Day evolved. The deodar row served as a demonstration of the city’s dedication to tree-lined urban approaches and civic beautification, aligning with the broader 1930s movement of highway and streetscape tree-planting in California. Although the Great Depression and shifting priorities caused a pause in large-scale Arbor Day plantings in the later 1930s, the original tree line continues to symbolize that era of civic environmental action.

In more recent decades, Gilroy has maintained its status as a community that values trees. The city achieved the designation of Arbor Day Foundation “Tree City USA” in 1979, meeting the standards of having a tree board or forestry department, a tree care ordinance, a community forestry program budget, and an annual Arbor Day observance. Volunteer tree-planting events, Arbor Day commemorations in city parks and neighborhoods, and partnerships with non-profits and schools underscore Gilroy’s continuing legacy. For example, in the 2020s the city and county partnered to plant hundreds of trees on campuses and in underserved neighborhoods, illustrating how Arbor Day has become both tradition and actionable civic stewardship.

Gilroy also faces the realities of urban tree management: the city has had to replace aging trees, address pests and disease, and ensure new plantings are suitable for the local climate and infrastructure. In this sense, Gilroy’s Arbor Day tradition is not just about planting trees once a year, but about maintaining, renewing, and educating citizens about the urban forest. Together, Gilroy’s historic 1930-31 planting, its Tree City USA status, the volunteer and educational events, and the ongoing management of its tree canopy show how Arbor Day is deeply embedded in the city’s landscape, identity, and environmental culture.

Arbor Day in California illustrates the evolution of a national holiday into a locally relevant celebration that encompasses education, civic engagement, and environmental action. From its origins in Nebraska to the present day, Arbor Day has grown from a simple act of planting trees into a complex observance that integrates schools, municipalities, counties, and the state government. California’s choice of March 7, in honor of Luther

Burbank, provides a distinctive identity for the holiday and links tree planting to the state's horticultural legacy. At the national, state, county, and city levels, Arbor Day fosters community engagement, enhances urban canopies, and promotes environmental awareness. Santa Clara County and the city of Gilroy provide concrete examples of how the holiday translates into tangible environmental action, connecting residents to the natural environment and creating a legacy of green space and education for future generations. So, grab a shovel, find a sapling, and let's go plant a tree in honor of Arbor Day!