

# Arbor Day Confusion

By William D. Stansfield



Being a native Californian, I always assumed that Arbor Day was celebrated on Luther Burbank's birthday, because he was the one who started the tradition of planting trees for their beauty and other utilitarian purposes on that day each year.

I was surprised to learn that this is not true.

The founder of Arbor Day was Julius Sterling Morton (1832–1902). Morton moved from Michigan to Nebraska Territory in 1854 and soon became editor of Nebraska's first newspaper. Finding the area virtually treeless, he began campaigning to engage the populace in tree planting.

In 1872, Morton proposed to the Nebraska State Board of Agriculture that the tree planting day be called Arbor Day. April 10, 1872, was set as the first Arbor Day in the United States.

Nebraska Governor Robert W. Furnas proclaimed Arbor Day as March 12, 1874; the day itself was not observed until April 10, 1874, because too few young trees were available earlier. More than a million trees were planted during that first observance.

Why these dates were chosen is not clear, but Arbor Day became an annual legal holiday in Nebraska beginning on April 22, 1885 (in recognition of Morton's birthday). Other politicians later found it more convenient to observe Arbor Day on the last Friday in April, as it exists in Nebraska today.

Most other states gradually began to establish their own Arbor Days, but by 1900 there still was no national Arbor Day. In 1936, Edward H. Scanlon, editor and publisher of the magazine *Trees*, began a long campaign to have all states annually celebrate Arbor Day throughout the nation.

Despite the efforts of Scanlon and many others, a National Arbor Day was not officially proclaimed by any U.S. president until Richard M. Nixon did so April 24, 1970. Unfortunately, this resolution pertained only to the year 1970.

Today, Arbor Day is celebrated in every state in the nation. The dates, however, vary from one state to another depending on the times most favorable for planting trees. The National Arbor Day Foundation has a list of Arbor Day dates at [www.arborday.org/arborday/arbordaydateslist.cfm](http://www.arborday.org/arborday/arbordaydateslist.cfm).

But what about Burbank?

Luther Burbank (1849–1926) is generally considered to be the United States' most famous plant breeder. In 1877, he established a nursery in Santa Rosa, California. During his lifetime, Burbank imported and created (largely through hybridization and rigorous selection) hundreds of varieties of plants.

In 1906, the California Federation of Women's Clubs passed a resolution recommending to the state legislature that Arbor Day be celebrated on Burbank's birthday (March 7). Governor James N. Gillett signed the bill in 1909. Eventually, Arbor Day in California became routinely celebrated during the period March 7–14, as it

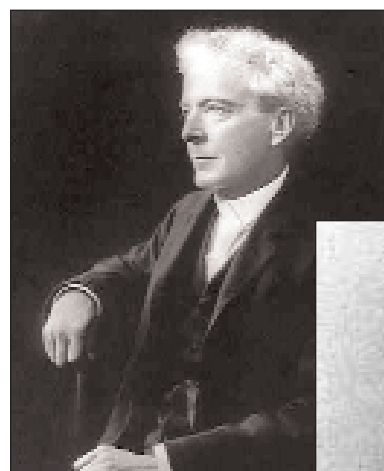
exists today (the exact date is established each year by gubernatorial proclamation).

In researching Burbank for other reasons, I came across his twelve-volume masterpiece, *Luther Burbank—His Methods and Discoveries and Their Practical Applications* (published 1914–1915). The frontispiece in volume 12 shows a color photo of Burbank and a group of children gathered at his gardens to celebrate his 65th birthday on March 7, 1914. According to the photo caption, the California legislature designated this date as Burbank Day. On that day, schoolchildren “plant trees and have other appropriate exercises.” Thus, Burbank Day and Arbor Day came to be one and the same in California.

Apparently Burbank did nothing to avoid the confusion this created. I could find no other reference to Burbank Day in the index to volumes 1 through 12, nor is Arbor Day mentioned there.

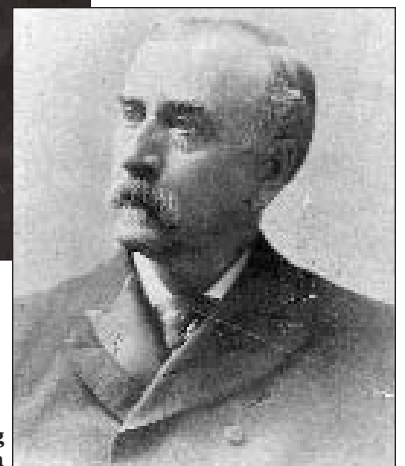
Burbank was a nurseryman/seedsman/horticulturist/plant breeder who depended on his business to support himself and his family. Although he wanted to be known as a scientist, the demands of his work did not allow him time to follow scientific protocols, and his avowed belief in the inheritance of acquired characteristics alienated him from most of the scientific community.

The National Arbor Day Foundation gives Burbank credit for contributing to the establishment of the Eddy Tree Breeding Station, which is now the USDA Forest Service Institute of Forest Genetics in Placerville, California. Given his own contributions to the introduction and improvement of fruit and nut trees, together with his suggestions for the improvement of other kinds of trees, it is perhaps not so surprising that native Californians, who grew up hearing the stories about Burbank confuse him with the founder of Arbor Day, Julius Sterling Morton.



Luther Burbank

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J. Sterling Morton