

SUBURBAN DIARY

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## Appreciating the life around my Norway maple

By Susan Weiner | July 10, 2005

*Another in a series of occasional essays on how we live our lives.*

If there were a "New England's Most Wanted" list for invasive plants, it would probably highlight a Norway maple's mug shot. There's an offender in my backyard. It rises proudly 50 feet high next to my garage in Newton. Flaunting its broad branches, it seems blissfully unaware that ecologically minded gardeners would like to stamp it out.

After moving into our house about 10 years ago, my husband, Allan, and I first noticed the paisley-shaped packages of seeds that parachuted lazily to the ground. Allan calls them pea pods because their shape reminds him of the Asian delicacy that seemed so exotic when he first explored Chinese food. He gripes as he rakes and sweeps them off our patio. However, many avoid the inhospitable concrete, landing instead on fertile soil. I feel as if I am always plucking mini-maples from my garden.

And then there are the roots. They pull water away from my primitive garden in the bed alongside the garage. On occasion, I've ruthlessly severed sinuous maple tree roots to give bulky shrubs room to spread. Weekly watering with a soaker hose is necessary to coax my shallow-rooted plants to survive. With this coddling, my green-leafed *Lamium purpureum*, spotted with silver and sporting small lavender flowers, has managed to spread from its initial sparse planting in a ring around the trunk.

I feel as if I should curse my Norway maple as a brazen invader. But I can't.

For starters, it has survived 10 years of neglect by an ignoramus like me. The only tree lore I know is that, on the rare occasions when I spread mulch, I shouldn't pile the bark chips high around the trunk. Rodents or bugs might attack the trunk under its cover.

One morning I was weeding under the tree's umbrella when a twig or cluster of leaves bounced off my head. I looked up to see a baby raccoon intently watching me from a hollow. Its black eye mask made me think of a child dressing up as a bandit. After I moved away in alarm, I noticed it vying for the view with a sister or brother. On another early morning, I saw three or four babies following their mother along the white picket fence that starts behind the garage. I quickly slipped indoors.

Then there are the squirrels. They relish the platform provided by the maple for their aerial acrobatics, flying fearlessly from branch to branch. The Norway maple is an important bridge in a squirrel highway comprising garage, evergreens, and fence crossing our backyard. Without the maple, there'd be a grievous gap between our garage and the skimpier trees along the border of our neighbor's yard.

The squirrels also use the tree for camouflage. As soon as Spooky, the neighbors' smoky-colored cat, begins to stroll up my driveway, a squirrel lookout shrieks a warning from on high. That's the signal for squirrels on the ground to hustle over to the maple and flatten themselves against its dark, deeply whorled bark. If I look quickly, I'm not sure whether that lump is a squirrel or a knob where an errant branch was lopped off by an earlier gardener.

The shier squirrels sometimes watch passively from their maple perches when I scatter unshelled peanuts on the patio sheltered by the tree's shade. If they don't move quickly after I retreat indoors, they forfeit treats. A blue jay swoops down to capture the nuts.

The blue jays seem to travel alone, and are like the Norway maples of the avian world, driving out gentler native species as they compete for food. One of my friends calls them "the pigeons of the suburbs."

But the house sparrows and other small birds that come to our feeder travel in flocks. These petite birds often spread companionably in a line, one to a branch. When they form a threesome, I think of the Japanese monkey trio, "hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil." It has been many years since I saw the originals at the gaudy shrine in Nikko. But I don't need to travel thousands of miles to feast my eyes. A whole world swirls around my Norway maple.

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