



book
benches
project

passion for trees

Tom Kimmerer advocates
preserving Central
Kentucky's tree heritage,
one venerable tree at a time

By Vickie Mitchell
Photos by Mark Mahan







This magnificent bur oak on Harrodsburg Road thrives today because of methods recommended by Tom Kimmerer.

Many of our oldest trees — bur oaks, blue ash, chinkapin oak, kingpin, and Shumard oaks — took root in the Bluegrass before settlers arrived. For 300 years and even several centuries longer, they have stood silent, shading green pastures and grassy lawns.

Nearly five years ago author and scientist Tom Kimmerer gave voice to these ancient trees. In his book *Venerable Trees: History, Biology, and Conservation in the Bluegrass* (University Press of Kentucky), he chronicled their importance to the landscape that makes the Bluegrass look so different from other parts of Kentucky and this country. Called the woodland pasture, it's an ecosystem common in Europe but not in this country, where woodland pasture is found only here and in the

nearby Nashville Basin. "It is the rarest ecosystem in the United States," said Kimmerer, a tree physiologist and forest scientist.

The woodland pasture developed here largely because of the roving nature of bison herds, which graze for a time and then move on. The intermittent grazing allowed these trees to grow and thrive.

Kimmerer's book gave him the chance to use what he'd learned in college and graduate school, in his teaching career — he has done research and taught tree physiology,

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Kimmerer inspects the bur oak that has withstood a nearby housing development.



forest biology, and urban forestry and was a professor at UK — and his field work. It also gave him a chance to write for a nonscientific audience and to exhibit his skills as a photographer; 100 of his photographs illustrate the book.

After *Venerable Trees* was published, Kimmerer began reinforcing what he had written with educational walks and talks, taking small groups to Bluegrass farms to meet the trees, hear their stories, and learn why and how they and the woodland pasture should be preserved. Last year he did 50 such walk/talks although he cut back substantially this year because of other demands.

Ben Chandler has been on several of Kimmerer's talks at his family's Polly Place farm on Pisgah Pike in Woodford County. His mother, Lucie "Toss" Chandler, an artist, environmentalist, and preservationist, has had a big impact on Kimmerer's



Left, Kimmerer uses a diameter tape to measure the tree's circumference. Above, he inspects the lightning rod system, and, right, checks the depth and quality of the mulch beneath the tree.





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work. The Chandler farm has been in the hands of Toss Chandler's family, the Dunlaps, since 1784.

"I've been deeply educated by Tom as far as trees go," said Ben Chandler. "I don't believe there is anybody who thinks more about them or knows more about them. He knows trees, loves trees, and is in awe of the fact that these trees have been here since before anybody related to any of us got to this area."

Venerable trees are all around us

Kimmerer's book tells stories of the venerable trees around us. One of them is perhaps the most famous tree in town — written up 18 times in Lexington's *Herald-Leader*, Kimmerer points out. The Old Schoolhouse Oak, a bur oak on a bluff at the intersection of Harrodsburg Road and Military Pike, is one of the success stories detailed in *Venerable Trees*. Developer Ball Homes listened to neighbors' cries to save the tree and adhered to measures recommended by Kimmerer to protect it. The tree has thrived even as the land around it has been developed for housing.

And even though venerable trees are found throughout town — at Castlewood Park, Coldstream Farm, Griffin Gate, the Kentucky One medical complex surrounded by a parking garage — the bulk of surviving venerable trees are on Thoroughbred and cattle farms. "Everything that I care about is in the horse farm country, in what I call the emerald necklace around us," Kimmerer said.

These were the trees that Kimmerer no-



Venerable trees such as this bur oak contribute to Central Kentucky's unique landscape.

ticed in the early 1980s on his daily commute to UK from the farm where he, his now ex-wife, Robin, and their family lived.

He also learned more about long-lived native species by observing how Toss Chandler had managed the ancient trees on her land.

"Before I was even thinking of my book, I got to know Toss, and we would wander her farm," he said. "All of her trees were named, and she'd done wonderful work ensuring their survival. A lot of my early ideas came from the Chandler farm."

Farm owners take action

He made other important connections with farm owners. The late Don Ball was a developer and the owner of Ball Homes, but he also had a Thor-

oughbred farm and was "passionate about trees," said Kimmerer. Ball's company provided financial support for Kimmerer's book and a foundation he created that has since been dissolved.

Libby Jones of Airdrie Stud in Midway was another early supporter. Jones is a board member of the Bluegrass Conservancy and has served the American Farmland Trust as well, and the farm she and her husband, Brereton Jones, own is home to numerous venerable trees. Jones frequently gives Kimmerer access to Airdrie for his walks and talks.

John Phillips, owner of Darby Dan Farm, attended one of Kimmerer's talks and later tried something Kimmerer talked about — allowing dead ancient trees to remain on farms to become wildlife habitat. Out of concern for the valuable Thoroughbreds that grazed in the field, Phillips didn't leave his tree standing, as Kimmerer often suggests. Instead, Phillips had it dragged to an-

“
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TO LEARN A
NEW WAY OF
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TREES.”

—Tom Kimmerer

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AFFINITY FOR TREES

It makes sense that artist Claudia Michler chose Tom Kimmerer's *Venerable Trees* as the subject of the bench she painted for last year's Book Benches Project. For the project, artists created 37 artful benches inspired by books with ties to Kentucky.

For decades Michler and her husband, John, have run Michler's Florist and Greenhouses (www.michlers.com) on Maxwell Street, owned by John's family since 1901. Although the couple have stepped back from the business somewhat as their children have stepped in, Claudia remains Michler's grower for shrubs and perennials. Trees are her husband's specialty. "I was weak on trees," she said.



From left, artist Claudia Michler, Arts Connect's Kate Savage, and Tom Kimmerer

COURTESY KATE SAVAGE

Then she found *Venerable Trees* among the books in John's horticultural library. Kimmerer's book "raised my awareness," she said. "It makes a lot of sense because I had seen what he talks about with these trees, and it rang my alarm bell about what is happening with them."

The bench she created pays homage to the bur oak, one of the five tree species Kimmerer focuses on. Bur oak leaves mingle with

leaves of other Kentucky natives that would be its neighbors in a natural setting. The bench was purchased at the Book Benches Project's benefit auction and now lives in the backyard of the Lexington resident who bought it.

Reading Kimmerer's book has given Michler even more appreciation for the bur oak outside her window on Maxwell. "It was planted by a squirrel," she said, and like many other trees on the property, including those that shade Michler's outdoor Kentucky Native Café, the Michlers allowed it to grow where it sprouted.

Michler's is known for stocking native plants and trees, and bur oaks are among the trees it sells. Claudia Michler's interest in native trees also prompted her to accompany the Lexington chapter of Wild Ones, a group that promotes environmentally sound landscaping practices, on a field trip and tour of Oakland Farm (www.oaklandfarmtrees.com) near Paris, Kentucky, which is growing a number of native trees for retail sale, including bur oaks, Shumard oaks, and chinkapin oaks.

other spot where it posed no danger and could become a home to squirrels, raccoons, birds, and other creatures.

Getting to meet with farm owners has allowed Kimmerer to clear up misconceptions, like the significance of dead tops in venerable trees. "We see these trees with dead tops, and we think that is a sign of decline. What it really is a sign of is readjustment." He effectively made that point to a farmer, who was ready to cut down a blue ash with a dead top, in a good-natured way with an attention-getting fact. "I said to him, 'Yes, sir, I don't reckon that tree has more than 300 good years left.'"

Tree pens are another measure Kimmerer has suggested, and some farms have built these protective fences around their venerable trees to protect them from livestock and lawnmowers.

Kimmerer began to champion the practice after seeing its impact at Polly Place, where Toss Chandler had built one around a bur oak struck by lightning 30 years ago. "What got Tom's attention is that after it was hit by lightning, it spawned a bunch of children," said Ben Chandler. "My mother put a fence around that to nurture a grove of 15 bur oaks that are now 30 years old."

Of course, like all other trees, venerable trees face natural threats. Forceful winds and lightning are enemies, and their impact seems to be increasing, Kimmerer said, citing a couple of recent weather-related losses. "The giant basswood in Lexington Cemetery got ripped apart this spring, and Airdrie Stud lost the largest bald cypress in the Bluegrass at the same time."

Planting replacements or protecting young trees that sometimes sprout up near old ones can help offset some losses from natural causes such as weather and old age. At Polly Place, the Chandler family has planted long-lived native species. Unfortunately, many farm owners, particularly those without long allegiances



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UPCOMING EXHIBIT AND MORE

Scientist and author Tom Kimmerer is also an accomplished photographer, and 100 of his photographs illustrate *Venerable Trees*.

He and his friend, photographer Guy Mendes, will have an exhibition called "Trees," Sept. 8-Oct.

27 at the gallery at Christ Church

Cathedral, 166 Market St. Hours are 9:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. weekdays and by appointment. The exhibition will also be part of Gallery Hop from 5 to 8 p.m. on Sept. 20.

This fall Kimmerer also plans to do several of his walks and talks, including one on Airdrie Stud near Midway. For more information, visit his website, www.kimmerer.com.



TOM KIMMERER PHOTOS



An accomplished lensman, Kimmerer has photographed many of Central Kentucky's venerable trees. From top left, his photos of an ancient chinkapin oak in Fayette County; an old bur oak in a pasture with llamas in Nashville, Tennessee; Shumard oaks at sunset in Jessamine County; a bur oak in the fog in Fayette County; an ancient blue ash in Scott County; an old bur oak in Fayette County

to the land, plant short-lived trees instead. "Pretty trees that will grow fast," Kimmerer describes them.

"We need to learn a new way of managing trees," Kimmerer said. He points out that in 60 years Fayette County lost 90 percent of its bur oaks, a good many to development. Without measures to protect farmland trees from everything from lawnmower abuse to unnecessary removal, "in the next 60 years, there goes our woodland pastures," he said.

Arborist Dave Leonard, a longtime friend of Kimmerer, sees trees in decline daily and believes what Kimmerer advocates is logical and effective but says budgets and priorities sometimes get in the way.

"What Tom is trying to get people to do is replant these specific trees and put them in tree pens. It is a reasonable thing to do, but you have to be of the right mindset.

I have several farms where owners love their trees and others where people don't want to pay to take care of them. They'll say, 'This is a horse farm, not a tree farm.'"

These days Kimmerer rises early to work on a new book for a major publisher, also about trees, and then heads to the field to work on a project to preserve a stand of bur oaks at a future Ball Home development on Reservoir 4. Those demands, along with consulting work he will continue to do for some farms and some other new opportunities, will cut into time he has for his venerable trees advocacy.

And although his book has had its fans — Wendell Berry told the New York Times it was one of the books on his nightstand — it hasn't made the difference he had hoped, at least not yet. "It hasn't translated into action," he said. Still, in the past few months, he's gotten a flurry of calls

from farms about his work, and he's open to continuing to consult as time allows.

So far, the woodland pasture and venerable trees that remain, Kimmerer said, "have been maintained by conscientious farmers. We don't have the bison anymore but we have the farms and we have the trees. We could easily get serious about planting trees and creating space for these trees to grow. We are planting the wrong trees and letting the ancient trees die because of poor management."

Ben Chandler said Kimmerer's underlying message is about stewardship and the need to realize that these trees transcend us. "The trees are standing monuments to the temporary nature of our lives," he said. "We think that we own this land and these farms; and the fact is we are all just tenants. We need to understand we are stewards." **KM**

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