Oklahomans gear up to celebrate Arbor Week

Arbor Day was founded by J. Sterling Morton in 1872 in Nebraska City, Nebraska when he led the charge of planting approximately 1 million trees. This tradition quickly spread and in 1882, schools across the country started to participate. Arbor Day became an official state holiday in Nebraska in 1885.

By the 1920s, many states across the country had passed public laws that stipulated the last Friday in April to be Arbor Day. However, it wasn’t until 1970 that Arbor Day became recognized nationwide. This year, Arbor Day will take place April 30.

History indicates Arbor Day tree plantings began in Oklahoma territory as early as 1890, but the first official observation was in 1901. The Territorial Legislature proclaimed that it would be the duty and responsibility of the school children to celebrate Arbor Day in perpetuity.

While a day-long celebration is good, Oklahoma stepped it up a notch in 1982 and began a week-long celebration that takes place the last full week of March. Oklahoma’s Arbor Week provides more time to recognize the value of tree plantings and celebrate the role trees play in our daily lives. Trees provide much-needed shade in the heat of the summer, make wind breaks, provide shelter for wildlife, help with erosion control and provide wood products, just to name a few of a tree’s valuable resources.

Oklahomans are well aware of the importance of trees. Unfortunately, the extreme weather conditions we experience some years has put a lot of stress on the state’s trees. The ice storm in October 2020 caused major damage to thousands of trees across the state. The sub-zero temperatures in February this year may have been too much for some younger trees. And, while trees typically live for many years, it can take years to replace a mature tree that dies.

Arbor Week is a way to remind residents trees should be planted every year as part of a long-term replacement plan and an easy way to improve their communities. Communities that have a healthy urban forest adds economic value and community pride.

When selecting trees for the landscape, include a wide variety of species. No more than 10% of the urban canopy should be planted with a single species. When planting trees in an urban landscape, be sure to select the best site on the property and consider the growth potential of the trees. Avoid planting too close to a structure. Also, don’t plant under power lines.

Check out Oklahoma State University Extension’s fact sheets on selecting and planting trees. Also, check with your local OSU Extension office for additional information. Remember, Arbor Week is a time of replenishing the urban forest and believing in our state’s future.