

12 Ways to Show Love to Nature's Oldest Storytellers

Guidelines to Protect Our Heritage Trees



**BLACK
HERITAGE
TREE**
PROJECT



Co-curated by the The Black Heritage Tree Project, The Black Earth Podcast, Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism (CHANT), Per Ankh, and the Virgin Islands Caribbean Cultural Center (VICCC) at The University of the Virgin Islands

Funded by the National Geographic Society

We define Black Heritage Trees as trees connected to Black people, historically Black places, and moments in Black history using their bark, their branches, and their roots to tell stories of Black heritage. In doing this work to map and preserve Black Heritage Trees we are joining a global conversation at the intersection of land-based storytelling and remembrance work, environmental and land justice, Black geographies, tree advocacy and climate action, and Black placekeeping. Through this project, we explore the world of trees as silent witnesses to the past, and view trees not as static inanimate objects in nature but as living archives of Black liberation, freedom, community building, resistance, and healing. Our mission is to identify, map, and support historic witness trees and spirit trees connected to Black heritage across the Global African Diaspora.





When you approach a Heritage Tree
Treat the tree like an old friend



You can share a hug or
sit down in its shade
and stay awhile.

*Trees love it when you
speak kind words, sing,
share a poem, or simply
say thank you*

*Trees are great listeners who can
sense waves of sound vibrations
underground and in their leaves.
Trees can hear you, respond to
sounds, and even emit their own if
you listen carefully. Ask the tree
a question and wait for a response;
it just might surprise you.*

*There is life in every breath
you share with a Tree*





Show gratefulness not only for their presence and shade, but also for the stories they hold

Saying thank you to Heritage Trees is important to show gratefulness, not only for their presence, shade, cool air, the oxygen they provide from CO₂ in the atmosphere, or the fruit they bear, but also for the stories they hold, their connection to ancestors, and the role they play in your community. Our body memory associates trees with life and this has a physically calming effect on our nervous system. Just by being in the presence of trees, our wellbeing improves.

3



Play music and dance to share your joy with a Heritage Tree

You may even catch them swaying to the music if you look close enough

4



*Celebrate the
Tree as a living
organism and
give it a name.*

A Tree is not an inanimate object, but a living organism whose body extends above and below the earth's surface, that breathes, feels pain, reproduces, gets sick, heals, drinks water, takes up nutrients from the soil, and dies after centuries or millennia, depending on the tree species. But they are also changing and growing in every season, and remain connected to other living things and other trees through networks underground. One thing that helps remind people that trees are alive is giving them a name. But once you name the tree, it will become your mission to protect it.

5

Ask for the Tree's permission and share

Trees, like all plants, need sunlight, water, soil, and carbon dioxide to live.

It is recommended that you first ask for permission and then share one of these elements of life with the tree before you take any fruit, seed, leaf, or even a walking stick from its body. Whether you are pouring clean water, providing some nutrient-rich soil, cleaning up trash around its roots, or just having a conversation, there is life in every breath you share. To do this is to practice reciprocity, the cycle of consciously giving and receiving from trees and all of life around us.

6

A woman wearing a white headwrap and a white lace-trimmed top with an orange shawl is looking up at a large, ancient tree with a thick, textured trunk. The background is filled with green foliage and the branches of the tree.

*Express gratitude for all that
this Tree has given and the role
it has played in your community.*

It may serve as a barrier for protection from strong winds, waves, and restless spirits, a healer using its bark or leaves to keep you well, a provider bearing fruit, vegetables, and nuts for nourishment, a spiritual guide creating a bridge between worlds and a space for quiet reflection, a witness to history watching over generations, or even a gathering place for people to meet, celebrate, and hold space for collective remembrance. There are many other roles that heritage trees can play in our lives, and so many reasons to be grateful for their living presence within our landscapes.



Acknowledge that the ground the Tree stands on may be sacred ground.

Consider what this land holds, whether the land is sacred or ancestral ground, a place marked by pain or trauma, a site of celebration and joy, or maybe the remains of someone's home, community, or town that no longer exists above ground. It may also be a space of remembrance. Before you draw closer, pause to take a deep breath. Ground yourself in the present moment and honor those who may have once stood beneath this tree before you. As a gesture of respect, you may wish to remove your shoes and avoid stepping on its roots. Remember that this living witness tree may once have offered safety, shelter, and refuge to your ancestors, human and more-than-human. And now you have the gift of standing where they once stood.

Photo taken by the Red Cross of an unidentified girl following the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.
Tulsa Historical Society & Museum
2002.190.001





Respect the Tree's body and avoid leaving any permanent mark from your visit

Your encounter with this heritage tree should not leave it scarred or burdened. Therefore, you should avoid carving into its bark or trunk, leaving trash on site, but especially anywhere near its roots, or climbing onto its already heavy or leaning branches. Be mindful of construction and lawn care practices in the area that can be especially hazardous to heritage trees and send the tree and its underground networks into shock. You should also refrain from pulling fruit or flowers by yanking or shaking their limbs. But instead, collect its fruit, seeds, leaves, etc., gently and only after first asking for the tree's permission, and then offering an element of life. Each action you take should honor the tree's life and the generations it has witnessed, leaving it as whole as you found it.



Celebrate each Tree's unique diversity

You can do this by expressing gratitude for the way the tree grows and expresses themselves. Before planting a new tree, take some time to learn how this tree interacts with other living beings and whether they are suited to live in that particular space and climate.

10

Trees are not just for human aesthetic or human benefit, they are members of a living community, whom we call Earth. There is a time and place they are most suited to.

*Use your gift of time, to nurture the past, present,
and future generations of life on Earth*

*Trees teach us a lot about
time. In the Northern
Hemisphere, their changing
nature signals the change
of time that we call seasons.*

*Through their growth, trees teach us that life
exists in a continuous cycle of life, death and
rebirth. In many cultures around the world,
trees are a symbol of wisdom for the continuity
they provide amongst change and across
generations. As you observe the trees, reflect on
the lessons they are teaching you about time.*

11

What should you do if you find a Heritage Tree in distress?

Stewardship begins simply by noticing that a tree needs help and choosing to take action.

If you notice a heritage tree in trouble, take action with care. Contact the landowner of the space where the tree is growing, your local forestry service officer, a certified arborist, or a nearby tree-centered foundation or advocacy group for support. You can also reach out to us at the Black Heritage Tree Project. Every heritage tree needs a protector.

12



Sources

Black Earth Podcast



The Black Girl's Guide to Natural Medicine Podcast by Sarah G. Ellis

Black Preservation Storied Podcast by Black Grassroots Heritage Preservation Network

Black to Nature Podcast by Stefanie Dunning

Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land by Leah Penniman

Spirits Come from Water: An Intro. to Ancestral Veneration & Reclaiming African Spiritual Practices by Ehime Ora

Trees Between Earth and Heaven by Art Wolfe

Edisto Beach: A Bottle Tree Scavenger Hunt by Carolyn Rizer Kight

Becoming Rooted: One Hundred Days of Reconnecting with Sacred Earth by Randy Woodley

Spirits that Dwell in Deep Woods by Wyatt Tee Walker

Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage by Dianne Glave

Rooted: Life at the Crossroads of Science, Nature, and Spirit by Lyanda Lynn Haupt

Rooted: The American Legacy of Land Theft and the Modern Movement for Black Land Ownership by Brea Baker

Our Trees Website by Nalini Nadkarni

Where the Palm Tree Grows by Christiana Davis

When the Trees Come Alive by Zayd Saleem

Thank you, Baobab Tree by Mi-hwa Joo

A Tree – A Reader on Arboreal Kinship by Marjolein van der Loo

When Trees Testify: Science, Wisdom, History, and America's Black Botanical Legacy by Beronda L. Montgomery

Inviting a Decolonial Praxis for Future Imaginaries of Nature: Introducing the Entangled Time Tree by Naomi Terry, Azucena Castro, Bwalya Chibwe, Geci Karuri-Sebina, Codruța Savu, Laura Pereira

The Healing Wisdom of Africa – Finding Life Purpose through Nature, Ritual & Community by Malidoma Patrice Somé

Unbowed by Wangari Maathai

Dose of Nature – The Evidence of Nature's Effects on Human Wellbeing.





BLACK HERITAGE TREE PROJECT

FOR MORE INFORMATION
VISIT OUR WEBSITE

WWW.BLACKHERITAGETREES.COM

Email: info@BlackHeritageTrees.com



FOLLOW US ON SOCIAL MEDIA

[@BlackHeritageTreeProject](https://www.instagram.com/BlackHeritageTreeProject)

