

# Lilife

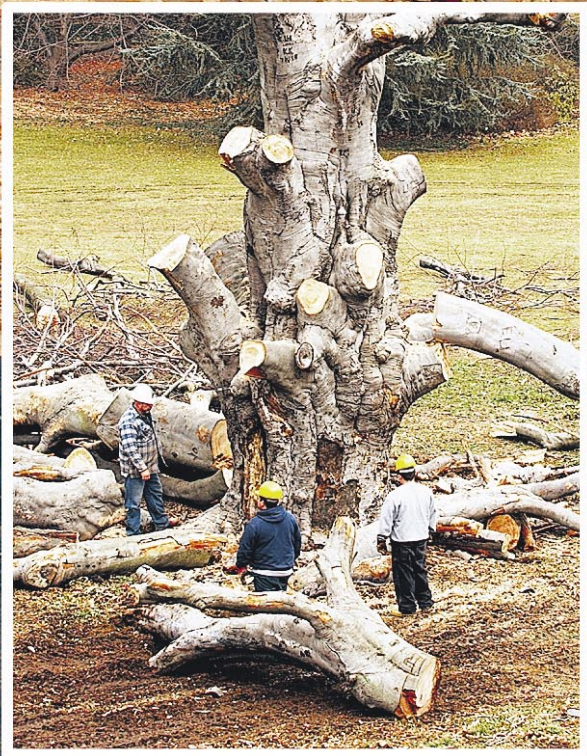
EAST END EDITION



## Hope for renewal

Mourning the beloved copper beech at Planting Fields, garden writer Irene Virag finds comfort in a scrawny sapling

G10



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# Goodbye

with a little hello in it

**An ending — but not the final chapter — in the story of Planting Fields' magical old Fairhaven beech**

**S**prinkles of pink, splashes of yellow, swatches of purple soften the landscape of Planting Fields Arboretum in Oyster Bay. Rolling lawns green beneath a cloudless baby-blue sky. Cherry trees bloom, crocuses parade, daffodils drift and pansies dance. It's as if the world is turning from black and white to color. On this April morning, spring finally feels real.

Sunshine caresses my face. I need the warmth, I need the color. I'm here saying a last goodbye to a tree that died — a tree I have loved since the summer day more than 20 years ago when I

was new to Long Island and first stood in the cool and quiet shelter of its branches. It was as if I were alone in a secret world beneath the purple canopy that spread for almost a quarter of an acre.

I was away when the old tree was taken down in February and so I'm here today saying goodbye to a dear friend. But I'm hoping to make a new one. Old orders change and I'm saying hello to the sapling that will inherit the wind and the rain and the sunlight that were once the province of a majestic landmark known as the Fairhaven beech. The succession is poi-

gnant as well as appropriate. In a public ceremony on Friday, the sapling will replace its mother tree.

I come to a small alcove outside the white iron greenhouse where Easter lilies and hydrangeas are being coaxed into bloom. Seven baby trees grace the alcove — their roots entrenched in loamy soil and protected by coverlets of mulch and black landscape fabric to ward off weeds and warm the earth. Brown remnants of last year's leaves still cling to some of the branches, but swelling buds speak of the season to come. They also speak of sea-



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / BILL DAVIS



**Back page**

Many trees planted in the Hamptons after the hurricane of '38 face the buzz saw.



**IRENE VIRAG**

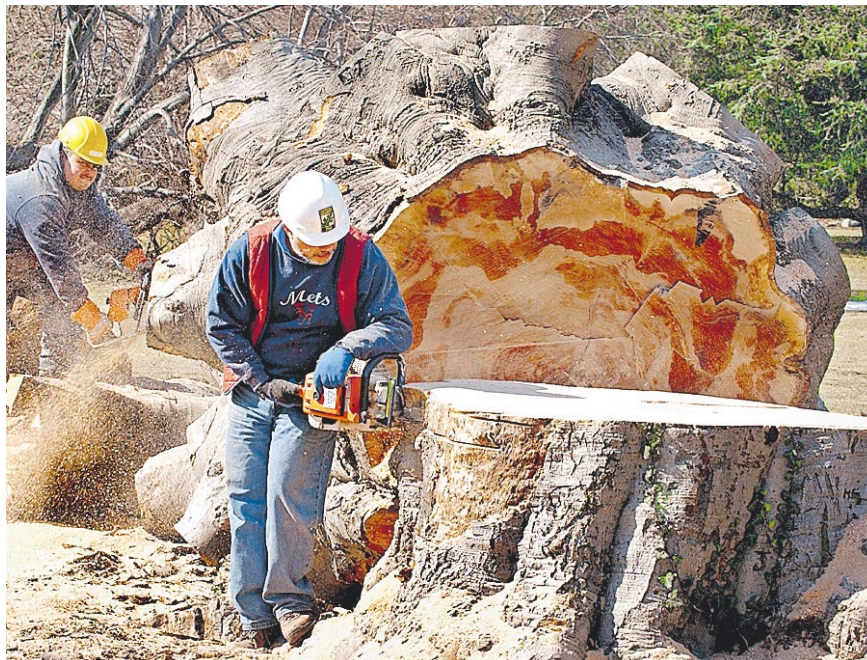
sons past — all are progeny of the great copper beech.

An admitted tree-hugger named Vinnie Simeone, the director of Planting Fields, points to a graceful, 6½-foot sapling. “This one here is the heir apparent. It has a nice structure. Low branches and leaves, and the top is young and vigorous.” Vinnie has been a family friend of the Fairhaven

beech since he was a horticultural student at Farmingdale State University and visited the arboretum where his career would blossom. In the years since, he came to know the tree’s magic — the copper tinge of its opening buds in spring, the shimmer of its glossy dark purple leaves in summer and the symmetry of its silver-gray branches in the sharp light of winter.

Remembering the past, Vinnie leans over to touch the future. The sapling is about 8 years old but barely a princeling in the kingdom of its kind.

See **COPPER BEECH** on G9



The Fairhaven beech, in its glory in 2002, far left, was cut down in February. Its rings show it was 160 to 175 years old.

**ON THE COVER:** An offspring sapling will be planted where its mother stood. Inset, the trunk of the great tree.



From the limbs of the old tree, left, Joe Schuster, above, fashions a chair. Right, arboretum director Vincent Simeone with the heir-apparent sapling that will be planted Friday.



## Mother beech

### COPPER BEECH from G6

“Within 10 years, this little guy will be 10, 15, maybe 20 feet tall. It’s a young, developing tree. It won’t be scrawny forever.”

I can’t help myself. I wish the new tree luck. It has big roots to fill. Rings from the old tree indicate it was 160 to 175 years old. It was not the largest tree on our island or the oldest, but it was, perhaps, the most famous. It came to Planting Fields in 1915, when William Robertson Coe had it transported along with a second copper beech from the childhood home of his wife, Mai, in Fairhaven, Mass. The daughter of Standard Oil tycoon H.H. Rogers, Mai was a headstrong young woman used to getting her way, and William was a self-made insurance magnate and plant collector. But she had played beneath the trees as a young girl, and it is nice to think that her husband acted out of love.

The two 28-ton copper beeches traveled 300 miles by barge to Oyster Bay. After roads were widened and utility wires along the 2½-mile route taken down and replaced at Coe’s expense, the trees were transported to Planting Fields. One died, the other survived and lived to become a legend. Mai died in 1924, after falling ill in her 40s. Her husband was already seeing the woman who would become his next wife. The estate eventually became a public arboretum and the copper beech lived on. Children danced around it and lovers carved their initials in its trunk.

In the spring of 1997, Vinnie knew the 60-foot-tall tree was in trouble — under attack by borers and a fungus-like pathogen.

He started propagating seedlings. I had begun writing about gardens and nature and visited the Fairhaven beech regularly. I introduced it to my husband and it became our tree.

A few years later, Vinnie surprised me during a lunch. “The copper beech is dying,” he told me.

I felt comforted when he said that seedlings from the mother tree were being nurtured as candidates to grow in its place. To me, gardens are metaphors for life and death, for rebirth and renewal. That goes for the garden in my front yard, for the garden of my heart, for the greater garden of Long Island. When trees are dying, Vinnie said, they put out extra seeds. Just because trees can’t move doesn’t mean they aren’t living entities. They have places to grow, people to see.

### Arbor Day Festival

The heir apparent of the historic Fairhaven beech will be planted at 11:30 a.m. Friday at Planting Fields Arboretum in Oyster Bay. The sapling will take its place on the Main Lawn next to Coe Hall, where the mother tree reigned for almost a century. The ceremony kicks off the state park’s 20th annual Arbor Day Festival, which continues on Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission to the weekend festival is \$5 for adults, \$1 for children under 12. Friday’s tree planting ceremony is free. For information, call 516-922-8600 or 516-922-9210.

The story of the great tree took a personal turn. Newsday ran a 13-month-long series on Long Island’s natural word and I wrote about the romance of the copper beech. My husband was the editor of the series, and when it was finished, his staff presented him with one of the seedlings. Thanks to Vinnie, it thrives behind the arboretum headquarters. A marker contains my husband’s name and describes him as “a friend of nature.” It’s already taller than he is and he gets misty-eyed when we stop by to check its progress.

In the years to come, other seedlings will be planted throughout the grounds. But now, on an early April day, I’m meeting the one that matters most. Not all the entrants in the first round of seedlings made it, Vinnie says. “These were the strongest of the bunch. And the darkest purple. We dug out second-year seedlings and put them in one-gallon pots.”

Once in the ground, the seedlings were put in the care of greenhouse manager Paul Dose, who sited them in a spot that was shaded and protected from the wind. Paul made sure they were properly watered and fed three times a year with a balanced water-soluble fertilizer. And he blocked up holes in the fence around the seedlings to keep out rabbits who dined on the lower branches.

Last summer, Vinnie picked his winner. “That fall when the old tree dropped its leaves, you could tell it wouldn’t be able to rally again. In the meantime I was keeping an eye on this one. I ID’d it as ‘the one.’ When we dig it up, I figure the root ball will be about 3 feet in diameter. This little guy is ready for his close-up.”

It’s time to visit the place where the new monarch will reign. I stand before a circle of bare earth about 100 feet in

diameter. And in the center, I see a mighty stump.

“We’re going to sand and shellac the stump to preserve it for a while so people can look at it,” Vinnie says. “So they can touch it, feel it. And we’ll create a new bed about 20 feet in diameter that will connect the seedling and the stump. We’ve installed irrigation — that’s the pipe right over there, pretty much where the seedling will be planted. We’ve rototilled and composted and amended the soil down to 18 inches. With a little luck, it could live even longer than its mother.”

And as it grows, it will carry on the heritage of the Fairhaven beech. There will be other tangible reminders of the glory that was. Arboretum woodworker Joe Schuster is crafting wooden benches from the limbs of the old tree, and one will be placed near the stump and the sapling. And any wood that isn’t usable has been chipped for mulch so that the mother will nurture the child.

I stand in the circle of freshly tilled earth and wonder what this little corner of the

world will be like in 175 years. The earth is soft and fluffy and I sink almost to my ankles. A tree could spread its roots in this soil. Settle in, stay a while. Indeed, in time, the feeder roots will reach down through that foot-and-a-half of soil to soak up moisture and nutrients, and the anchor roots will delve even deeper to several feet beneath the surface.

The stump is so big I could lie down on it and my feet wouldn’t hang over the edge. On the other side of the circle, two people are reading a sign that summarizes the tree’s story. They look at us and move on as if not wanting to disturb a grieving family.

I touch the exposed heart of a tree I’ve loved since I first came upon its wonder. My fingers trace the circles that speak of time. My hand goes over the gnarled and scarred gray bark. Wild strawberries grow in a crevice.

“Goodbye,” I whisper.

I check the heir apparent before I leave. “Hello,” I say.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF PLANTING FIELDS ARBORETUM

One of two 28-ton copper beeches that were moved in 1915 to Oyster Bay from Fairhaven, Mass. The one that flourished for another 80 years became known as the Fairhaven beech.

