Requiem for a Cork Tree

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Around two o’clock on the afternoon of Thursday, 28 September 1995, one of the best loved trees at the Arnold Arboretum died—the old Amur cork tree, *Phellodendron amurense*, which grew along Meadow Road.

It died as it lived, giving of itself freely to an adoring public: a group of twenty-two schoolchildren from the Winsor School in Boston were perched in the tree, posing for a photograph, when the weight of the group caused the tree to crack audibly and collapse. The children hastily climbed down, with no one suffering injury.

Without a doubt it was the most photographed tree in the Arboretum, and the most loved. In fact, it was loved to death. The tree had been in a slow state of decline, particularly over the last ten years, as a steady parade of trampling feet compacted the soil around its base, smothering its roots, and as children and adults of all ages climbed among its low, spreading limbs. Those pressures simply compounded the health problems that are normal for a tree that is over one-hundred-and-twenty years old. Over the years, the Arboretum staff had tried various techniques to keep the public out of the tree but found none that could overcome its sheer magnetism—the irresistible urge it inspired to go up and touch the soft bark that had been rubbed to a smooth polish by countless generations of Boston children. So the decision was made to let the cork tree die as gracefully as possible. It became the only tree in the Arboretum that people were “allowed” to climb.

When the end finally came, the tree was clearly on its last legs. Every year for the last ten years, Arboretum pruners had had to remove dead branches from the tree, making it ever thinner and weaker. The low, spreading limb, where all the children perched, had descended from four feet above the ground in 1983 to only two feet in 1995. This past summer’s drought, bringing forty straight days without rain, was just one more problem for the tree to cope with.

The cork tree had an altogether remarkable history. It arrived in Boston as a seed from the Imperial Botanic Garden in Saint Petersburg, Russia, on September 14, 1874, just two years after the Arboretum was founded. It was assigned the accession number 143–A, indicating it was the one-hundred-and-forty-third tree to be acquired by the Arboretum and very likely one of the first trees planted on the grounds.
In the prime of life in April 1924, at age fifty, the cork tree's broad, spreading crown is fully formed. Obviously, children have not yet started to climb among the branches.

In July 1946, at age seventy-two, a tradition of photographing the tree with children is beginning to emerge and the cork tree's lower limb is adding girth.
When death finally came, at the hands of its friends, it had passed its one-hundred-and-twenty-first birthday only two weeks before.

One of the interesting things about cork trees is that they are dioecious, meaning there are separate male and female individuals. Our beloved specimen was a male. Despite its common name and the corky feel of its bark, *Phellodendron amurense* is not the source of commercial cork used for wine bottles and bulletin boards. (That product comes from a species of oak that grows in the Mediterranean region, *Quercus suber*.) The specific name, *amurense*, refers to the tree’s origin in the Amur River Valley of Manchuria, a region with very severe winters. Many other plants from this region are growing well at the Arboretum and seem particularly well adapted to the rigorous climate of New England.

By 1988, one of the cork tree’s lower limbs has been removed and children are clearly comfortable climbing along its spreading limbs.