



Planting trees in Algeria

Posted by [David Maxwell](#)

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[David Maxwell](#)

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March 05, 2016 05:01AM

Registered: 11 years ago

Posts: 197

Several folk in the Orchard Systems forum wanted information on my tree planting in North Africa. Michael very appropriately commented that this was inappropriate in the Orchard systems, but suggested that it was nevertheless something of interest to folk who care about nature. He suggested the Just Talk forum. So here goes.

I went to Algeria about 6 weeks after the official end of the 7 years' of vicious war between Algeria and France in 1962, and after an "all clear", travelled to Djemila, in the Petit Kabylie, a semi-mountainous, very rural area inhabited largely by peasant farmers. This town actually had a particular significance, as it was built on the ruins of a major Roman city, Cuicul, which was at the crossroads of the main roads across North Africa and the North-South road into Africa. The Romans actually had extensive olive groves at the time, but when they left, in the 5th century, and the area was inhabited by Berber tribes, who were pastoralist herders, the olives gradually died from lack of care, and for the next 1500 years the hills gradually became barren and eroded. By the time I arrived, there was little left but highly acidic shale, growing sparse scrub upon which goats survived. (And goats are not kind to vegetation).

I was originally occupied in rebuilding a small hotel which had existed prior to the War, and was used by tourists visting the excavated Roman ruins. As the French left, they systematically smashed everything they could, simply as a protest against being expelled. So I was set to work rewiring and re-plumbing the 8 room hotel, to try to create a tourist industry anew. (Actually, it was kind of interesting - the original electricity was a 12-volt system, powered by large banks of huge lead-acid batteries in the cellar, and literally lead water pipes fed from a cistern on the roof. We rewired it for 220 volt electricity, and the town bought the first diesel generator they had ever had to power both the town office and the hotel.) I remember redoing all the plumbing, but can't remember much detail.)

Just after we finished the hotel, a group turned up looking for folk willing to take charge of seedling trees. They were Protestant missionaries, who, unlike the Catholics, figured that trying to proselytize in the midst of a savage war, which ultimately pitted Christians against Muslims, might be counter-productive. Instead, they hunkered down in the farthest corner of the bled, as far away from the fighting as they could get, and grew seedling trees against the day when the fighting would eventually end, and the devastated landscape need to be restored. (I don't think they were thinking particularly of reforestation of land which had been barren for 15 centuries, but it worked out awfully well.) Amongst their stock they had Aleppo Pines, which are the trees one sees clinging to the rocky cliffs in Southern Italy - tremendously hardy, and tolerant of highly acidic soils. The villagers immediately decided that "Rougie" would know what to do, (I had a vigorous red beard at the at time), so after a 3 hour crash course in how to lay out and plant trees, I was presnted with 3000 Aleppo Pines. I mobilised the Scout troop, and we got them planted in 3 weeks. At that point the missionaries came back to check on progress, pronounced themselves well pleased, and the following day dropped off a futher 60,000 trees.

This now called for a new strategy. There was no way a pack of Scouts was going to handle this challenge. But the mayor came to the rescue. He got up in the Saturday market, and gave a brilliant and impassioned speech, saying that the blood of the martyrs who had died for the liberation of their homeland was now in danger of being washed away from the soil of the hills, but if we planted trees to halt the erosion their memory would be preserved. The entire male community turned out with picks and shovels, and to the accompaniment of a fair amount of entertaining drama on my part to keep the process interesting, we got the 60,000 trees planted over the next 3 weeks, before the fall rains started.. In the end, the hills which had been barren for 15 centuries were covered with green, as far as the eye could see, and beyond the horizon. This , wholly accidental, encounter was by far the most significant and worthwhile thing I have ever done. If done on a large enough scale, (and they undertook to carry on in future years - an additional 50,000 trees each year), it actually changes the climate. The trees send their roots down in to the deeper aquifers, and draw the water up, which evaporates and later falls back as rain. (And this area was parched and dry through the summer.) And, the mayor was right, the trees stabilise the soil, break the erosion, ...and fix the blood of the martyrs.

Did they survive? Yes. The mayor appointed the fellow who had the distinction of having killed more Frenchmen with nothing but a knife, (a large one to be sure), as the guardian of the trees. The message was that any goat found amongst the trees would become the guest of honour at a community meschuite, (roasted on a spit all day, continuously basted with a spiced sauce - not to be sniffed at. We had one to celebrate the opening of the hotel.) I did go back about 5 years later, and the trees which were perhaps 10 cm at planting time were now 2 to 3 meters high and the hills a beautiful green - nourished by the martyr's blood?

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Zone 5b in Nova Scotia

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[Todd Parlo](#)

[Re: Planting trees in Algeria](#)

March 05, 2016 08:16PM

Registered: 10 years ago

Posts: 301

David, you spent a good amount of your free time to share this story with us and it is greatly appreciated. I find things like this to be very inspiring, regardless of their appropriateness perhaps to the general purpose of this forum.

Practical information is extremely important to the enterprise we are all involved in, but both larger philosophies, and here, inspiration for me is inseparable and so often hard to expel from the conversation. For that I apologize, but for what it is worth, I believe that this culture is in the predicament it is in because discussion of the bigger picture has been relegated to corners of religious dogma and anathema to common dialog. This is why at the water cooler we talk about technical issues or t.v. shows, instead of who we are as human beings. It is also why it is so easy to accept solutions to a problem that may not be in keeping with our system or morality.

In the preceding story, I was intrigued by the planting itself. It was not important to David's story perhaps, but it is what stood out to me personally. Having just had the friendly argument recently about how (apparently) it is impossible to plant an orchard without fossil fuels and large equipment, I felt alone in suggesting it could be done with a shovel and human beings. I have commented on this before, so I will leave it at that. The point I am trying to make is that, being someone who is trying to do his part as an environmentalist, I have to make a distinction between "want to" and "have to" when choosing action on my farm. I bring it up here because this does not fit into the gist of these forums, but rather for me has dominion over every decision I make regarding all these topics. The word holistic had at its inception the whole, taking everything into account, presumably under one defining idea, philosophy or system. So, when someone comments that they won't buy a raspberry plant from a grower who fumigates his soil (regardless that it is allowed under Organic Standards), because they think it is morally wrong, I like hearing that. It is inspiring because that is the reason I am an organic grower, and is just as valid as a technical nuance. Many of us are scientists at heart, but perhaps it is the ethereal consciousness that really should govern humanity, and that includes the farmer.

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