

First Person

Peach tree tale

By Polly Ingraham

When my family returned home from a week away recently, we found that our young peach tree, right beside the driveway, had suffered a mighty blow. Three of its main branches had broken off almost completely and lay on the ground, bearing dozens of small peaches that were not yet ripe.

It was a sad sight. The tree had been a gift from a family in the church where my husband serves, and we had planted a pear tree and a cherry tree as companions to it. Over the summer we had taken pride in how well the three fruit trees were doing. I liked to think of them as our new set of three children. True, the birds got all the cherries before we had a chance to pick them, and the pears and the peaches were still way too hard to eat, but the trees were growing and seemed content.

My husband sawed off the three fractured branches. In truth, the outlook is not peachy.

Unfortunately, what we hadn't done was prune, and this proved devastating to a tree that had way too many peaches to support on too few branches. If the tree could have spoken (like the apple trees in "The Wizard of Oz," for example) it would have surely complained — as many of us busy people do — of being "overloaded." It finally got our attention by going through a kind of breakdown from which it may not recover.

My husband sawed off the three fractured branches, leaving just two, on either side of the peach tree, and we will apply a horticultural position to the trunk to see if the tree might rally and send forth new life. But, in truth, the outlook is not peachy.

LOOKING AT THE TREE, I think about my parents. When I was growing up on the North

Shore of Long Island, they planted and took care of a whole peach orchard. Even though my father took the train into his office in New York City each weekday, he devoted weekends to outdoor work, usually wearing his cap while driving a tractor. My four older brothers have often told me that during the summer when I was born, my parents were deep in peaches — harvesting, freezing, even selling them. Every night, there was no question what was for dessert.

When my father died, almost 20 years ago, my mother had a private moment scattering his ashes in what had once been the orchard. By that time, the peach trees were hardly distinguishable from all the other growth surrounding them. And when she died — 14 years to the day after my father died — my siblings and I scattered her ashes nearby, and thought of the times they had spent together caring for our property.

Nowadays, many of us with kids don't devote

much time to tending our trees because we are constantly heading off to organized events.

I've been

a hard-core sports mom for a while now, and this summer I went to a lot of lacrosse tournaments with my daughter. I sometimes look at my companions on the sidelines and wonder how the basic home chores are getting done when the people who used to do them, many of us at least, are now spending hunks of our weekends on bleachers or in lawn chairs with coolers. It's different now.

I don't mean to cast the past in too rosy a glow here: My parents may not have done a lot of pruning to prevent breakage either. But I'm listening to my tree. □

Polly Ingraham lives in Shutesbury.

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