

## The Rise and Fall of a Weeping Willow Tree

by: Betsy Bearden

Mama loves to garden. I tell you, she could plant a stick, and it would produce an abundance of No.2 pencils! She was born with a green thumb; I was not. Sometimes I ask her to simply do a “walk-by” through my dead houseplants, hoping it will resurrect them.

Unfortunately, her front yard is about as big as most people’s living room. Still, she manages to cram every living thing she can into the tiny space, and it grows and thrives. She has apple trees and azaleas, pansies and impatiens, and a butterfly bush that attracts butterflies! Mama has managed to create a small safe-haven for all sorts of creatures there in her little urban sanctuary.

One Easter, Mama decided she wanted a weeping willow tree.

After considering how large the tree would grow and given the size of her front yard, I wanted to ask, “Are you out of your mind?” But who am I to deny my mama her wishes? So, my husband, Steven, and I set off to the neighborhood nursery for a weeping willow.

We planted the tree exactly where Mama wanted it-right smack in the middle of the front yard! The rest of the family stood around and watched, and someone remarked, “Do you know how big that tree is going to get? We just got Mom an Easter lily to plant along with her little impatiens and marigolds.” Steven just smiled, wiped the sweat from his eyes, and kept digging. His clothes were soaked. The day was unusually warm-even for Easter Sunday in Atlanta.

In a couple of months, the tree had already started to grow. Mama was so proud. But then summer came, and we were hit with a severe draught; the tree started to dry up. Mama fought to save it, even though she was supposed to conserve water, she still watered the tree every day- after dark, of course. It just wasn’t enough. The tree died and Mama was so sad. She had never lost a tree before.

The following Saturday, while Mama and her sister, Margie, were out shopping, Steven and I went to get a replacement. We figured it would be a nice surprise for her when she got home. Steven and I walked through the nursery, and finally found a beautiful weeping willow, full and lush and green, just sitting all by itself next to the chain link fence.

Well, it happened! As soon as we started carrying the tree out of the nursery, it broke the drought! Lightning struck the fence next to us, and it began to pour. Must be a good omen, right? We rushed the tree to Mama’s and got it planted. Once again Steven’s clothes were soaking wet-but not from sweat this time! We left feeling happy about our good deed, but in all the rain and the rush, we forgot to leave a note explaining what we’d done.

Later that afternoon, Mama called. "You're not going to believe this, Betsy," she exclaimed, "but when Margie and I drove up, it was pouring rain, so we sat in the car, waiting for it to let up a bit. Well, I got to looking and that's when I noticed my tree!"

"Your tree?" I said. I was sitting there thinking something bad had happened. I asked, "What about your tree?"

She continued, "Well, I said, 'Margie, look! Look at my tree! It's a miracle! This rain has brought my little tree back to life and it looks even bigger and fuller than it did before!' I can't believe it, Betsy; you've got to see this. It's a miracle!"

Oh-I had to hold back my laughter-at least until she was finished. Then I told her what we had done.

Within four years, the tree had grown to nearly thirty-feet tall. It was beautiful, and was visible to all within the neighborhood. Passersby would comment about how beautiful and graceful-looking the tree was. Birds nested in it, squirrels used it as a detour from stray cats.

Butterflies would light upon its tender branches, and like Christmas ornaments, create a delicate contrast of vivid colors in gold, magenta and black. The tree also provided shade for yellow and purple pansies, so they lasted well into late spring and early summer.

She watched from her second story window as birds made their nests in the branches of the tree. Later in the season, she saw the babies hatch from their eggs, and eventually, fly away.

But then, a rarity occurred in October of '95, when Hurricane Opal struck Atlanta. The 60-mph gusts felled the mighty willow. Quietly and gracefully, in the middle of the night, she blew over. Her huge branches encompassed Mama's car, but somehow those big soft branches didn't even dent or scratch it. She was planted by storm, and by storm she was taken.

It's Easter again, so Steven and I are off to the nursery. Want to guess what Mama is getting this year? Think of something a little less proliferous, and much more slow-growing...this year, Mama is getting a pink Dogwood, and *maybe* an Easter lily!

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