

Wangari Maathai (1940–2011) lived in the African nation of Kenya. She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her work to improve the environment. Read the selection and answer the questions that follow.

Planting the Trees of Kenya

by Claire A. Nivola

1 **A**s Wangari Maathai tells it, when she was growing up on a farm in the hills of central Kenya, the earth was clothed in its dress of green.

2 Fig trees, olive trees, crotons, and flame trees covered the land, and fish filled the pure waters of the streams.

3 The fig tree was sacred then, and Wangari knew not to disturb it, not even to carry its fallen branches home for firewood. In the stream near her homestead where she went to collect water for her mother, she played with glistening frogs' eggs, trying to gather them like beads into necklaces, though they slipped through her fingers back into the clear water.



Wangari Maathai, pictured in 1988, inspired thousands of Kenyans to care more for the land.

4 Her heart was filled with the beauty of her native Kenya when she left to attend a college run by Benedictine nuns in America, far, far from her home. There she studied biology, the science of living things. It was an inspiring time for Wangari. The students in America in those years dreamed of making the world better. The nuns, too, taught Wangari to think not just of herself but of the world beyond herself.

5 How eagerly she returned to Kenya! How full of hope and of all that she had learned!

6 She had been away for five years, only five years, but they might have been twenty—so changed was the landscape of Kenya.

7 Wangari found the fig tree cut down, the little stream dried up, and no trace of frogs, tadpoles, or the silvery beads of eggs. Where once there had been little farms

growing what each family needed to live on and large plantations growing tea for export, now almost all the farms were growing crops to sell. Wangari noticed that the people no longer grew what they ate but bought food from stores. The store food was expensive, and the little they could afford was not as good for them as what they had grown themselves, so that children, even grownups, were weaker and often sickly.

8 She saw that where once there had been richly wooded hills with grazing cows and goats, now the land was almost treeless, the woods gone. So many trees had been cut down to clear the way for more farms that women and children had to walk farther and farther in search of firewood to heat a pot or warm the house. Sometimes they walked for hours before they found a tree or bush to cut down. There were fewer and fewer trees with each one they cut, and much of the land was as bare as a desert.

9 Without trees there were no roots to hold the soil in place. Without trees there was no shade. The rich topsoil dried to dust, and the “devil wind” blew it away. Rain washed the loose earth into the once-clear streams and rivers, dirtying them with silt.

10 “We have no clean drinking water,” the women of the countryside complained, “no firewood to cook with. Our goats and cows have nothing to graze on, so they make little milk. Our children are hungry, and we are poorer than before.”

11 Wangari saw that the people who had once honored fig trees and now cut them down had forgotten to care for the land that fed them. Now the land, weak and suffering, could no longer take care of the people, and their lives became harder than ever.

12 The women blamed others, they blamed the government, but Wangari was not one to complain. She wanted to do something. “Think of what we ourselves are doing,” she urged the women. “We are cutting down the trees of Kenya.

13 “When we see that we are part of the problem,” she said, “we can become part of the solution.”

14 She had a simple and big idea.

15 “Why not plant trees?” she asked the women.

16 She showed them how to collect tree seeds from the trees that remained. She taught them to prepare the soil, mixing it with manure. She showed them how to wet that soil, press a hole in it with a stick, and carefully insert a seed. Most of all she taught them to tend the growing seedlings, as if they were babies, watering them twice a day to make sure they grew strong.



Wangari's movement relied on the efforts of many, including these women meeting in Muranga, Kenya, in 2001.

- 17 It wasn't easy. Water was always hard to come by. Often the women had to dig a deep hole by hand and climb into it to haul heavy bucketfuls of water up over their heads and back out of the hole. An early nursery in Wangari's backyard failed; almost all the seedlings died. But Wangari was not one to give up, and she showed others how not to give up.
- 18 Many of the women could not read or write. They were mothers and farmers, and no one took them seriously.
- 19 But they did not need schooling to plant trees. They did not have to wait for the government to help them. They could begin to change their own lives.
- 20 All this was heavy work, but the women felt proud. Slowly, all around them, they could begin to see the fruit of the work of their hands. The woods were growing up again. Now when they cut down a tree, they planted two in its place. Their families were healthier, eating from the fruit trees they had planted and from the vegetable plots filled again with the yams, cassava, pigeon peas, and sorghum that grew so well. They had work to do, and the work brought them together as one, like the trees growing together on the newly wooded hills.
- 21 The men saw what their wives, mothers, and daughters were doing and admired them and even joined in.
- 22 Wangari gave seedlings to the schools and taught the children how to make their own nurseries.
- 23 She gave seedlings to inmates of prisons and even to soldiers. "You hold your gun," she told the soldiers, "but what are you protecting? The whole country is disappearing with the wind and water. You should hold the gun in your right hand and a tree seedling in your left. That's when you become a good soldier."
- 24 And so in the thirty years since Wangari began her movement, tree by tree, person by person, thirty million trees have been planted in Kenya—and the planting has not stopped.
- 25 "When the soil is exposed," Wangari tells us, "it is crying out for help, it is naked and needs to be clothed in its dress. That is the nature of the land. It needs color, it needs its cloth of green."