

Wangari's Trees of Peace: A true story from Africa



*The earth was naked. For me the mission
was to try to cover it with green.*

Wangari Maathai

Wangari lives under an umbrella of green trees in the shadow on Mount Kenya in Africa.

She watches the birds in the forest where she and her mother go to gather firewood for cooking.

And she helps harvest the sweet potatoes, sugar cane, and maize from the rich soil.

Wangari shines in school, and when she grows tall, like the trees in the forest, she wins a scholarship to study in America.

Six years later, her studies over, Wangari returns to her Kenya home and sees a change.

What has happened? she wonders. *Where are the trees?*

Wangari sees women bent from hauling firewood miles and miles from home.

She sees barren land where no crops grow.

And where are the birds?

Thousands of trees have been cut down to make room for buildings, but no one planted new trees to take their place.

Will all the Kenya become a desert? she wonders, as her tears fall.

Wangari thinks about the barren land.

I can begin to replace some of the lost trees here in my own backyard—one tree at a time.

She starts by planting nine seedlings.

Watching the seedlings that root gives Wangari the idea to plant more—to start a farm for baby trees, a nursery.

In an open space, she plants row after row of the tiny trees.

Next, Wangari convinces the village women that planting trees is a good thing. She gives each one a seedling.

“Our village will be better when we have trees again. You’ll see. We are planting the seeds of hope.”

The women spread out over their village, planting tiny trees in long rows, like a green belt stretching over the land.

The government men laugh.

"Women can't do this," they say. "It takes trained foresters to plant trees."

The woman ignore the laughter and keep planting.

Wangari pays them a small amount for each seedling still living after three months—their first earnings ever.

Word travels, like wind rustling through leaves, about the green returning to Wangari's village.

Soon other women and cities in Kenya are planting long rows of seedlings, too.



But the cutting continues.

Wangari stands tall as an oak to protect the old trees still remaining.

"We need a park more than we need an office tower."

The government men disagree.

Wangari blocks their way, so they hit her with clubs. They call her a troublemaker and put her in jail.

And still she stands tall.

Right is right, even if you're alone.

But Wangari is not alone.

Talk of the trees spreads over all of Africa, like ripples in Lake Victoria.

More women hear the talk and plant even more seedlings in longer and longer rows.

The seedlings take root and grow tall—until there are over 30 million trees where there were none.

The umbrella of green in Kenya returns.

Women walk tall, their backs straight, for now they can gather firewood closer to home.

The land is no longer barren.

Sweet potatoes, sugarcane, and maize grow again in the rich, red earth.

The whole world hears of Wangari's trees and of her army of women who planted them.

And if you were to climb to the very top of Mount Kenya today, you could see the millions of trees growing below you, and the green Wangari brought back to Africa.