

Growing Trees for Kenya

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Growing up in a family of peasant farmers in the highlands of Kenya, **Wangari Maathai** (Wahn-GAHR-ee Mah-TIE) often fetched water from a nearby stream. She would stop to play among the clumps of bright-green arrowroot leaves and enjoy sips of cool, pure water. She loved to reach out for the strands of frogs' eggs that drifted by. Later, she watched as thousands of tadpoles wriggled through the clear water.

An excellent student, **Wangari** graduated with honors from an all-girl high school run by Catholic missionaries and was awarded a full scholarship by the leader of the local Catholic church. It was a rare achievement for a Kenyan girl to attend college in the United States.

Wangari left her rural village and traveled to Mount St. Scholastica College in Atchison, Kansas. She completed degrees in biology in the United States before returning home to become the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate.

When **Wangari** returned in the mid-1960s, most of Kenya's forests had vanished. The land was parched and barren. The government had cleared it to grow coffee and tea to sell to other countries. Instead of growing food to eat, farmers now grew crops for the government. This made life difficult for the villagers, especially the women and children.

Kenyan women raised the crops, gathered firewood to cook, and fed their families. Many walked 19 miles several times a week in search of firewood. Without it, their children were forced to eat foods that didn't require cooking. This caused widespread malnutrition.

Wangari, now Dr. **Maathai**, a strong, energetic woman with a broad smile and sparkling eyes, decided to restore the forests by planting trees - millions of them. She was dedicated to improving the lives of her people.

Since trees mature in three to four years in the tropical climate of Kenya, Dr. **Maathai** thought planting seedlings was the best way to provide villagers with firewood for cooking and fruit to eat and sell. Village women could feed their children and earn small amounts of money by raising seedlings.

On Earth Day 1977, Dr. **Maathai** and several followers planted seven trees in her backyard and founded the Green Belt Movement. "The Earth was naked," she said. "For me, the mission was to try to cover it with green."

When Dr. **Maathai** asked the Department of Forestry for 15 million seedlings, they laughed. Government officials often considered rural women ignorant. But even though these officials believed trained foresters were needed, they gave Dr. **Maathai** and the Green Belt Movement as many seedlings as they wanted. The women and children planted them so quickly that before long the government withdrew its offer of free seedlings.

The Green Belt Movement continued to spread across Kenya as thousands of rural women and children collected seeds and started their own nurseries. Treeplanting projects at hundreds of schools across Kenya became an important part of the Green Belt Movement. The children fetched seedlings from the nurseries, planted them on school grounds, and tended them as part of their school day.

Keeping seedlings alive in the dark-red, sun-baked earth wasn't easy. To give the baby trees a fighting chance, some children collected soda bottles from trash piles, filled them with water, turned them upside down, and planted them in the earth next to each seedling.

Dr. **Maathai** also led some of the women in protests against the government's destruction of the forests. In 1989, the women learned that the government was going to destroy the only public park left in the capital city of Nairobi. Government officials planned to cut down most of the trees to make way for construction of a 62-story skyscraper. When the women gathered in the park to protest, they were beaten by police.

Dr. **Maathai** has been threatened, beaten, and jailed many times by the Kenyan government for protesting the destruction of public forests.

But she never stopped.

"My skin is thick, like an elephant's. The more they abused . . . me, the more they hardened me," she said.

More than 100,000 Kenyans have joined the Green Belt Movement, and more than 6,000 groups in villages across Kenya operate their own nurseries. Schoolyards, farms, and church compounds are now green with millions of trees.

Green Belt Movement programs have spread across Africa and around the world. Green belts can be found in U.S. inner cities and Haiti. More than 30 million trees have been planted worldwide.

In 2004, Dr. **Maathai** won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work. She is convinced that "When we plant trees, we plant the seeds of peace and seeds of hope." She urges young people around the world not to waste natural resources and to treat them with respect.

Today, green belts cover portions of Kenya's barren landscape, and fewer villagers go hungry. But Dr. **Maathai** believes there is still much to do. When asked, "What's next?" she replied, "More trees. I will grow more trees."

SIDEBAR

Learn about another tree planter on HighlightsKids.com.

Thanks to Dr. **Wangari Maathai** (above), Kenya is a little greener. School kids take care of seedlings in nurseries like this one (right).

SIDEBAR

Women carry firewood (above). Dr. **Maathai** and children (bottom) plant seedlings. Green Belt members plant trees on an eroding hillside (left).

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