



Nature Photographer Robert Llewellyn on MOVING FROM LOOKING TO SEEING

by April Thompson

For the past 40 years, Robert Llewellyn has photographed thousands of unique beauties—many of them trees, flowers, seeds and other landscape elements. “For a photographer, anything can be a good subject, even dirt,” he says. “My mission is to move people from merely looking at things to deeply seeing things as they are.”

For Llewellyn’s first collaboration with garden writer Nancy Ross Hugo, *Remarkable Trees of Virginia*, published in 2008, the pair drove 20,000 miles in four years observing and capturing the complex lives of 100 notable trees. It was on this assignment that the Earlysville, Virginia, photographer developed his now-signature technique, subsequently used to illustrate one of their follow-up books, *Seeing Trees*.

“I wanted to photograph small parts—leaves, fruit, bark and flowers—so I would cut off a bloom, twig or seed pod and put it on a light table and take hundreds of photos, which, strung together, were infinitely sharp, like a botanic drawing. I found I could zoom into my subject up to a pollen grain this way.”

Llewellyn lives with his wife on a 60-acre farm in tree-studded Albemarle County, enjoying 200-year-old oaks outside their front door. His latest of nearly 40 books, *The Living Forest*, is due out in October.

Why are trees, to your eyes, so captivating?

When I first started photographing trees, I thought of them as objects in the design of a photograph, rather than something that’s alive. When I

began to look at a tree's acorns, flowers and pollen, I realized that this tree is doing what we do: it's born, grows, has offspring and dies; it seeks air, nutrients and light. Trees all have a fascinating master plan for survival and reproduction. Some trees can build an architectural structure that grows 150 feet high and can withstand 100-mile-an-hour winds.

How do you suggest that a newbie tree-watcher start learning how to see trees more intimately?

Read a book like *Seeing Trees*, then get up, go out and observe trees in real time, at different times of the year and track what they do. Take pencil and paper and draw them, or take pictures. Start by exploring trees in your backyard or a nearby park.

Share a quality magnifying glass to encourage youngsters to get closer to the trees, too. Challenge them to find flowers, fruit or spots where last year's leaves fell off. Kids love that. I visit schools and have kids go out and collect fallen tree debris that we look at together.

What makes some of your favorite trees so distinctive?

Red maples make an early entrance in spring, their flowers appearing before the leaves, and drop their "helicopter" seeds in spring to germinate before anything can eat them. In spring, an entire hill will turn red with these maples, but it's not their leaves; it's the trees' flowers, getting ready to drop their showy red dresses on the ground before anything else is blooming.

You can learn a lot about trees by seeing what's on the ground through their life cycles. Sycamore, for example, has both male and female flowers. The female flowers develop into fruiting seedpods that dry out and hang on through winter until a spring wind blows them apart.

Rather than seeing trees as dead in winter, what can we look for?

Trees are very much alive in winter. When leaves fall off, they leave behind little pointed leaf buds. You can cut them open and find tiny green leaves encapsulated which remain unfrozen, waiting to open up in the spring. Twigs

in winter show leaf scars where the leaves dropped.

We can also witness the diverse life in and on trees in all seasons. That includes bugs, plants, fungi and parasites, in addition to the animals that nest in them and eat their fruits and nuts. I once found a round ball on an oak tree that turned out to be a wasp gall for its offspring, its larvae hanging in the middle.

How are tree-viewing skills transferrable to other aspects of our lives?

The skill of observation is vital: moving from looking to seeing. At a party, you can just mindlessly chatter with people or you can really see them—what their bodies, gestures and emotions are communicating. Labels and names get in the way of seeing things as they are. Stop labeling things or worrying about what they are called; as in meditation, just relax into observing, to embrace things as they are.

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