

DOWN HOME: Third-favorite tree just may make it

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For awhile there, I thought the once-magnificent red oak in our backyard was bound for the Big Woodchip Pile in the Sky. But now it looks like my third-favorite tree will survive.

You may recall (and since I don't presume you do, I'll tell you the whole story, anyway) this tree received a vicious "girdling" almost four years ago. Bark peeled away all around the center trunk about 20 feet off the ground. Every leaf above that point faded to dead brown.

Here's how our local tree doctor described what happened: "Mr. Knox, what you've got is a boar squirrel. This is probably his first mating season. See, he climbed up there and stripped that bark off and 'sprayed' the spot to mark his turf. Next, he'll come back to get those dead leaves for his nest so it'll be all ready when his baby squirrels arrive."

He suggested I pour red fox urine on the tree's trunk, since "red foxes are the natural enemies of squirrels" and the scent of a predator should keep the furry varmints away.

So, I climbed up in the tree and pruned off the dead portion. Then, I poured fox pee on the trunk.

Our puppy, Topanga, acted like she was being stalked every time she went out. But unfortunately, before you could say "Rocky and Bullwinkle" another squirrel girdled another branch, which died and fell across several lower branches.

The folks at the pest-control center told my wife, Joanna, fox urine won't

work around here, because the local squirrels don't know any foxes, and so they're not afraid. Too bad I couldn't gather some coyote urine.

Well, while I was up in the tree removing the second dead branch, I hung tiny bottles of fox urine all over—just in case. The squirrels wore it like cologne. So, next we captured and hauled away scads of squirrels, plus a random possum.

For awhile, I thought our problems were over. No more squirrel vandalism up in the red oak. Unfortunately, like the consequences of sin, the fallout—literally—of the squirrel damage lingered. A couple of weeks ago, the top one-quarter of the tree, weakened from previous girdling, toppled over into the lower branches.

The only “fun” aspect of this escapade has been the occasional excuse for a grown man—me—to climb a tree. So, I clambered up with my bow saw to take a look. Unlike my previous pruning excursions, this time, I couldn't figure out how to get to the broken branches and cut them loose from an angle where they wouldn't swing up or back and knock me out of the tree.

A couple of days later, the tree surgeon showed up with a crew. He suggested they “re-shape” the tree so it no longer looks like it's been chomped on by a dinosaur, fertilize the roots and let it grow again. He says it'll work. Hope so.

This time of year, our daily highs approximate the temperature on Main Street in Hades. We need the shade. But I hope squirrels roast.