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I'm often asked by readers what my suggestions are on what individuals can do to help fight climate change whenever I write about environmental issues. My straightforward answer is to plant trees and to campaign for others to do the same.

One of the little-known secrets that should never stay a secret is that the Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI) gives away fruit tree seedlings for free if these are requested by barangays. I have seen for myself the excellent varieties of fruit trees that are also sold by BPI to individual buyers at very affordable prices. We should prompt our barangay captains to make the necessary request for free seedlings from BPI, to establish barangay tree nurseries, and to make the seedlings available for free to all barangay residents.

If one wants to plant forest trees like narra, there's the Forest Management Bureau of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, which has native tree varieties. But there are also social media groups where one can buy native tree seedlings such as molave, kamagong, almaciga, apitong, lauan and yakal. One such Facebook group I joined is the Philippine Native Tree Enthusiasts, which encourages its members to share "relevant information on the seed sources, germination and propagation, cultural care, and problems of native trees."

One learns very interesting information shared on social media. For instance, trees widely assumed as native to the Philippines are, in fact, alien (exotic) trees, such as acacia, mango, duhat and many others. There are generous souls among social media groups who give native seeds for free. I myself have received free seeds of the now critically endangered tindalo tree and the beautiful rainbow eucalyptus tree, locally known as bagras.

Apart from these seedling sources, all households have the potential to become cradles of tree seedlings if we make an effort to plant the seeds of the fruits we eat like mango, mabolo and atis; and if we plant the seeds of trees that are naturally growing in our lots or nearby roadsides, like narra, talisay and banaba. We should take on the habit of planting seeds in plastic and glass container discards, and make the seedlings available in our front yards with signs like "free seedlings, pick one."

There have been repeated efforts by the Philippine government to exhort citizens to get into the habit of planting trees, but all the lofty declarations usually end up as empty slogans because no sincere and sustained programs are implemented.

As early as 1947, President Manuel Roxas issued Proclamation No. 30 declaring "the second Saturday of September of each year as Arbor Day, to be observed in schools and elsewhere by the planting of trees and plants." In 1977, President Ferdinand Marcos issued Presidential Decree No. 1153 directing that "every citizen of the Philippines at least ten (10) years of age... shall plant one tree every month for five (5) consecutive years." In 2003, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo issued Proclamation No. 396 declaring June 25 as Philippine Arbor Day, "to be observed throughout the nation by planting trees and ornamental plants."

More recently, Congress passed the Arbor Day Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10176), which decrees that “(a)ll able-bodied citizens of the Philippines, who are at least twelve (12) years of age, shall be required to plant one (1) tree every year.” It has been seven years since the law was passed, but we don’t see or hear its exalted aspirations being followed. Even its requirement that all local government units (LGUs) must pass an ordinance designating a tree-planting day each year for all their constituents has been snubbed. If Congress is serious, it should pass a law withholding each LGU’s entitlement to its internal revenue allotment if it fails to comply yearly with the Arbor Day Act.

The wellbeing of our planet is all too important to be left in the thoughtless care of our government leaders. Planting trees will help Mother Earth ensure our survival in the only home we have.

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