



Plant-for-the-Planet
Felix Finkbeiner
Germany

Felix Finkbeiner was standing behind the stage at the United Nations. He was about to speak in the UN General Assembly Hall, on the very podium that is normally used by the presidents, prime ministers, and chancellors of the world. "I was incredibly nervous," Felix says. "Right before I went on stage, I just wished I was in school." That is quite an unusual wish for a 13-year-old.

In the audience was a woman who was very special to Felix. Her name was Wangari Maathai. She was an environmental activist, and the first female professor in the East African nation of Kenya. For the past 30 years, she had worked together with local communities to plant 30 million trees in African countries. "These trees had provided many women with their own income for the first time, and protected the soil from erosion. But they also store carbon," Felix says. "Every tree extracts CO₂ from the atmosphere."

When Felix was five years old, he had gotten a present that he really loved. It was a stuffed animal, a polar bear that was almost as big as he was at the time. When, four years later, he had to give a presentation in elementary school about the climate crisis, he immediately realized the gravity of the situation: because he knew that polar bears were being threatened by rising temperatures and melting snowcaps.

For his presentation, he tried to learn about possible solutions to the climate crisis. That is when he first read about Wangari Maathai. Inspired by the work she was doing planting trees in Kenya, at the end of his presentation Felix came up with a proposition for his classmates: "Let's plant one million trees in every country on earth!" he said. That was in 2007, and it was the beginning of his organization, Plant-for-the-Planet.

A couple of weeks after his presentation, Felix and his classmates planted their first trees. Two local journalists reported on the event, and other schools heard about it and decided to join in. "Someone built a little website for us," Felix remembers. "It was basically a ranking of who had planted the most trees."

Soon more schools joined the effort, and it became a competition: and one year later the students had planted 50,000 trees. After three years they hit one million! That is how Plant-for-the-Planet started to grow.

New studies show that planting trees is the most effective way to absorb the harmful greenhouse gas CO₂ from the atmosphere. "Trees are fantastic, because they are the only machines we have that can absorb the CO₂ we emit," Felix says. "Every tree that we plant absorbs about 10 kilos of CO₂ per year."

With our current levels of emissions, that means that we have to plant a lot of trees. And that is why Felix came up with a very ambitious goal: he and his organization, Plant-for-the-Planet are mobilizing the world to plant and restore a trillion trees.

A trillion is a thousand billions—an almost unimaginable number.

But planting such a large number of trees is not only good for the climate: it has other positive effects too. "When we plant trees, it helps to slow down desertification; it protects biodiversity; and it creates jobs," Felix says.

Trees that are planted in tropical regions are particularly helpful. They grow much faster than in other parts of the world, so they can absorb more CO₂, and they can do it sooner. The tropical regions of Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia also have the greatest amount of potential area for planting new trees.

And so, in March 2015, Plant-for-the-Planet started planting trees in the Yucatan peninsula, in Mexico. Each tree they plant can absorb up to 200 kilos of CO₂ in only two decades—and they have already planted more than 6 million trees. Their ambitious goal is to plant a million additional trees every year, and to look after each plant, to make sure that it is thriving. Of course, they need a lot of workers for this project. “In Yucatan we are already the biggest employer,” Felix says, proudly.

According to a new study by scientists at ETH University in Zürich, Switzerland, there is plenty of available space on the earth for planting trees. In fact, they have calculated that the amount of available space is equal to an area as big as the United States of America.

“All around the globe, there are large areas that can be reforested,” Felix says. “Of course, global reforestation is not the only solution to the climate crisis.” Another important factor, he says, is educating young people to stand up for themselves and argue for the importance of fighting the climate crisis. “So we began to offer academies,” Felix says. “The core idea is: we teach each other.”

In the academies, children learn how to give speeches and, of course, how to plant trees. To date, Plant-for-the-Planet has organized more than 1,600 such academies, and trained more than 91,000 children and youth in 75 countries. “Whoever dares to, later gives speeches to entrepreneurs, governments, and other children, to get them on board,” Felix says.

Of course, planting a trillion trees is a very ambitious goal. That is why Felix, along with other Climate Justice Ambassadors from the Plant-for-the-Planet academies, decided to work together to come up with innovative ways to do this. “What would Wangari Maathai do today, to connect people who want to plant trees around the world?” they asked themselves. And the answer they came up with was that probably she would develop an app.

Their idea was simple: just like when Plant-for-the-Planet first started, and schools had competed with each other to see who could plant the most trees, they decided that people worldwide should be able to share their tree-planting successes with each other.

“So in 2019, we launched our Plant-for-the-Planet app,” Felix says. “It’s amazing how much people like it, and how many people use it to plant trees! Today there are more than a hundred tree planting projects on the app. But we want to have hundreds.”

Of course, Felix and his fellow activists are fighting against time. Every year, the world is losing around 10 billion trees per year. “Deforestation is the worst in Brazil, Indonesia, and Malaysia,” Felix says. And while there are positive trends in Malaysia and Indonesia, the current government of Brazil has actually *weakened* many of the protections of the Amazon forest. “Still, in principle we’re making progress when it comes to the protection of our forests,” Felix says.

“There are many reasons to be disappointed when it comes to climate policies,” he says. “But slowly we *are* moving forward. It is a very important step that with the Paris Climate Agreement we now have a common goal, and all of the countries have made clear what their contribution will be.”

It is projects like Felix’s that have raised global awareness of the importance of trees in the fight against climate change. To date about 14 billion trees have been reported to the tree counter; and they now have 75,000 members. “Planting trees is the easiest thing that we can do to alleviate the climate crisis, and everyone can contribute,” Felix says.

Before she passed away in 2011, Wangari Maathai had started the One Billion Trees Campaign. Now it is up to the next generation to continue her legacy. “We took it to the next level,” says Felix. “It is now the One Trillion Trees Campaign. I will definitely continue to work on this project. We still have a long way to go, to get to one thousand billion trees.”

When we plant trees, we plant the seeds of peace and hope.

Wangari Maathai

Call to Action: Help save the world, one tree at a time. Download the Plant-for-the-Planet app, and share your stories! Stop talking. Start planting! Follow Felix Finkbeiner on Twitter @FelixFinkbeiner and www.plant-for-the-planet.org

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