



Have You Ever Barked Up the Wrong Tree?

by Marilyn Loser

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As I write it is very windy outside so I wandered my mind, rather than outdoors Alamosa, looking for a column idea. Slowly, tree idioms/phrases swirled through my head. How did these come about? Some are obvious, others not so much. Turns out there are also a lot of tree puns and riddles that make me laugh and take my mind off of the howling wind.

Barking up the wrong tree: Generally means you're looking in the wrong place or following an incorrect assumption. The allusion is to hunting dogs barking at the bottom of trees where they mistakenly think their quarry is hiding. According to the United Kingdom phrases website (UKPW), "The earliest known printed citation is in James Kirke Paulding's *Westward Ho!*, 1832: 'Here he made a note in his book, and I begun to smoke him for one of those fellows that drive a sort of a trade of making books about old Kentucky and the western country: so I thought I'd set him barking up the wrong tree a little, and I told him some stories that were enough to set the Mississippi a-fire; but he put them all down in his book.'"

Knock on wood: The phrase comes from a time when pagans used to tap or knock on trees to summon the protective spirits that resided in them and ward off evil spirits. According to theidioms.com website, the British version of the phrase is "touch wood" and the phrase originated in the early 17th century.

Up a tree: This phrase has multiple meaning. Up a tree often refers to someone driving another "up a tree, or up the wall," – driving one crazy. It is considered to be an American term. Another meaning refers to someone is trapped in difficulties. As the earliest citation, the UKPW reports a quote from John Neal, in *The New Englanders*, 1825 - "If I didn't I'm up a tree - that's a fact."

Out of the woods: It is a positive statement meaning someone is now safe and not in a fearful situation – often a negative financial situation. The earliest use of this phrase, according to the Oxford dictionaries website (OEDW), is found in the 1792 diary of the novelist Frances Burney.

Out on a limb: Many people first think of a limb as a human body part such as a leg or arm. In this case it refers to a large tree branch. The OEDW says it means 'in a position where one is not joined or supported by anyone else' -- isolated. There is a risk that the branch might break under the weight. It originated in America around the late 1800s states the theidioms.com website.

Out of one's tree: While I'm on the 'out of' category, I thought I'd add this one that I have heard rarely. The OEDW says it is a figurative way of suggesting that somebody is stupid or mad.

Can't see the forest for the trees: I've always loved this one and, at times, applied it to myself. It means a person fails to grasp the main issue because of over-attention to details. In other parts of the world the phrase "can't see the woods for the trees" dates back to the 16th century.

Money doesn't grow on trees: What child in our country hasn't heard this? Usually spoken by a parent when a child wants something the parent doesn't want (or can't) pay for. It's an idiom that pithily indicates that something is not easily available. It first appeared in print on July 17, 1819 in the Boston Daily Advertiser according to the OEDW. "Money does not grow on trees; and I verily believe, if the philosopher's stone which turns every thing into gold, could be found in every field, it would serve rather to increase the vices, follies and miseries of mankind." Interesting point!

Of course others point out that indeed money does grow on trees, especially in the early days, as paper money was made entirely from wood pulp!

There is more – perhaps another time! For now, I'll turn to a few puns and riddles. I admit I've always loved what I call 5th-grade humor. No disrespect for students of that age intended. The following are from the website: Treesgroup.org/tree-jokes.

"How did the pine tree get in trouble? It was being knotty.

When a nomadic tree senses danger it packs up its trunk and leaves.

What kind of tree grows in your hand? Palm tree.

How do trees access the internet? They log on."

I'm writing this on my computer and need to submit it, so I will 'LOG OFF'.

"Did you know that I can cut down a dead tree just by looking at it? It's true. I saw it with my own eyes!