

Priorities for Small Woodlot Stewardship

Forestry Fact Sheet for Landowners

By Adam K. Downing*

Owning land remains a uniquely American Dream. In Virginia, thousands of “new” landowners realize that dream each year. Owning land, no matter the size, carries with it a responsibility. To best care for the natural resources on your land, for the benefit of yourself, the next owners and even society at large... this is STEWARDSHIP!

- 1) **Know what you have.** Learn what trees, shrubs, grasses, weeds, wildflowers and wildlife on your property. Study them to learn how they grow. The more you know about individual tree species, for example, the better equipped you are to tend the overall health of your woodlot.
- 2) **Have a plan.** Work together with other family members to agree on a plan. A plan is a flexible document to serve as a reference and guide. Important plan elements are:
 - a) *Goals and objectives.* What do you want from your property? Are these goals reasonable and achievable?
 - b) *Map.* A hand-drawn sketch, an aerial photo or a tax map can help you get a complete picture of what you have and where activities will be focused.
 - c) *Inventory.* Describe what kind of plants, animals, special features, etc. you have, where they are located and how common they are. A complete inventory is not usually necessary or practical. A representative sample will suit most purposes.
 - d) *Stewardship strategy.* What needs to happen to meet your goals? How will this occur? When and where will the various activities happen? Who will be doing the work?
- 3) Here are a few **stewardship considerations** for small woodlot owners.
 - a) Identify and control non-native invasive plants.
 - i) Species such as tree-of-heaven, Kudzu, Japanese honeysuckle, garlic mustard, mile-a-minute, autumn olive, etc. need to be identified and controlled.



*Extension Agent, Forestry & Natural Resources for Virginia’s Northern District

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- ii) Invasive plants nearly always require chemical control for lasting results. Call your local extension office for recommended products, timing & methods.
- b) Protect special/unique features.
 - i) Natural springs, water ways, rock outcrops, large remnant trees, unique plants, etc. should be identified and protected. If trail, road or building construction, or timber harvesting is in the plans, take measures to protect ecologically and personally important areas.
 - c) Take care of the soil, it's the foundation.
 - i) If there is any bare soil, re-establish vegetative cover as quickly as possible with a native seed mixture beneficial to wildlife. (Note: If erosion is severe, certain non-native plants like fescue are appropriate)
 - ii) If water is on the property, make sure soil does not move toward or into the water. Sedimentation (soil in water) leads to impaired aquatic ecosystems. This can happen when crossing water ways with vehicles or by leaving bare soil up-slope.
 - d) Improve your woodlot's diversity & productivity.
 - i) Forests naturally thin themselves. You can guide that process by giving certain desirable species more room to grow by releasing them from competition.
 - ii) This can be accomplished mechanically or chemically and is a great way to get firewood at the same time!
 - iii) A system called "crop-tree management" has been developed by the U.S. Forest Service with small acreage owners in mind. Crop trees are picked for their value(s) for wildlife, aesthetic appeal, potential timber value, waterway protection, etc. (Refer to <http://ohioline.osu.edu/for-fact/0050.html> for more information on Crop Tree Management.)
- 4) **Safety.** Working in your woods to build a trail, cut firewood or control invasive plants is great way to exercise and bond with others. It can also be very dangerous. Chainsaws, tree parts, poisonous plants and biting insects are a few common perils of working in the woods. Take time to learn basic safety practices concerning your situation.

Learn more about sustainable forestry by contacting your local Virginia Department of Forestry representative (in the blue pages under state government or online at www.dof.virginia.gov) and by participating in the Virginia Forest Landowner Education Program (VFLEP). Run by Virginia Cooperative Extension in cooperation with the Virginia Forestry Association, the Virginia Department of Forestry, the Virginia Tree Farm Committee, and the forest industry (through the Sustainable Forestry Initiative State Implementation Committee), VFLEP provides a host of educational programs and materials for forest owners. Visit the VFLEP website at <http://www.cnr.vt.edu/forestupdate/> or contact your local Extension office.

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