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Tips for involving the next generation in the tree farm

By Clint Bentz

“The best fertilizer for the land is the footsteps of the owners.” This piece of advice was given to me years ago by a 5th generation family forest landowner and I have taken it to heart. What this really means is that you can’t truly love or care for something that you are not personally connected with. As landowners, we have the rare privilege of caring for a part of God’s earth and trying to leave it better than we found it.

It is easy to forget how rare this privilege is. Today, less than five percent of the general population of the US owns rural farm or forest land. With so few of us around, our educational system and society in general are not organized to pass on the values, ethics, and love of land ownership to our children and grandchildren. This is a job we need to do ourselves.

Creating emotional connections to the property should begin at an early age. Tree farms are great places to share your core values and work ethic with your children and grandchildren. What are some easy ways to involve the next generation in your tree farm?

- Have a family work party. This is such a simple idea that we many times overlook it. Talk to your kids and grandkids and set a time for the family to gather for a work party. Our family has put on several such parties and they are always a lot of fun. Ideas for work projects include planting trees, clearing trails, pruning trees, building a campsite or picnic shelter, building a fence, setting up a hunting plot – the secret is to find a project that interests your family and then getting organized to get it done. Organizing includes setting the date, making sure the necessary tools and materials are ready, and that childcare and food are taken care of. You don’t have to do all of this work – in fact, part of the fun is involving the family members in the planning and organizing part of the event. The benefits are that a worthwhile project gets completed, and that

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- family members learn to work together and have fun doing it. A longer term benefit is that they are building sweat equity in the farm. Your kids and grandkids will come back with their friends and proudly point out what they have built or planted – even if all they did was hold the boards while you did the work!
- Don't miss opportunities to teach skills to your children and grandchildren. How many of us are born knowing how to measure trees, how to correctly set a fence cornerpost, how to change the oil in a tractor, or any of the thousands of practical skills we use every day on our tree farm? Pass on these skills to your heirs!
- Share your passion about the property. Talk to them frequently about why you own the property and what your dreams for the property are. Tell them stories of what the property used to look like and what you expect it to look like in the future. Tell them the stories about the history of the property, and of the family's connection to the property.
- Try to maintain a good balance between work and family life. Nothing drives kids away more than viewing the tree farm as competition for their time and affection. I know that my children scatter each time I ask them to go on a walk – they have learned that walking with me generally entails stacking wood somewhere!
- As children grow, involve them in decisions made on the property—especially long-term decisions that will impact them in the future. The more you involve them in the decisions, the better prepared they will be when they have to make these decisions on their own when you are gone.
- Involve your adult children as if they were owners of the property with you. The longer you are around to referee family meetings and set up a pattern for them to follow, the more successful they will be managing the property after you are gone.

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- Create recreational opportunities on your tree farm for the family. Improve your favorite camping spot into a permanent campsite. Build hiking trails and picnic areas. Build an archery range, a pistol range or a gun range. Create a paintball or airsoft range. Set up a hunting stand.
- Make it easy to spend time enjoying the property with family and friends and encourage the family to recreate on the property. One of the most important “returns” on a tree farm is the lifestyle benefits they offer. Making it easy for family members to visit, camp, fish, hunt and play on the property is one of the best ways to build strong Ties to the Land.
- Offer your property for a public tour through your local forestry association chapter and involve the family in the tour. We generally conduct a VIP tour just for family members prior to a public tour of the property. We then encourage the children and grandchildren help lead the public tour. It is always fun to see what the kids say about the property – and to hear them talk with pride about what we have accomplished as a family. Seeing the property through other people’s eyes is a great way to build your kid’s passion for the property (and it always rejuvenates me as well).
- At your next family meeting, brainstorm with your family to find 12 practical ways to increase your family’s passion and love for the property. Write them down and try to do one of these activities each month.

The secret to building strong Ties to the Land is engagement – hands on involvement working together, playing together, and planning and caring for the future of your property together as a family.

Clint Bentz is a CPA living in Oregon with his wife and six children. His practice is centered on helping family forest landowners deal with intergenerational succession issues. He is the principal author of “Ties to the Land: Your Family Forest Heritage.” Clint’s family was recognized as the 2002 National Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year. Clint is the past chairman of the National Operating Committee of the American Tree Farm System, and is a trustee of the American Forest Foundation. He welcomes your comments and questions at cbentz@bcslc.com or (503) 769-2186.