

News from the Watershed

Trees: Put them to work for you

Trees are one of my favorite things. Have you ever stopped to ponder how much benefit we get from trees? Sure, they are beautiful and provide shade, but they offer us so much more. For thousands of years, trees have provided us with oxygen, food, medicine, wood, rubber, erosion control, protection and shelter. In addition, trees can be a useful tool in the agricultural and natural realm.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) practices “putting trees to work” in their conservation planning. Planting the right trees in the right places can go a long way in excellent land management practices. For example, trees can be planted for use of windbreaks, silvopasture, alley cropping, forest farming, riparian forest buffers and enhancement of wildlife habitat.

The planting of trees for windbreaks, which are rows of vegetation, reduces and redirects wind from possible damage to crops and livestock. Windbreaks planted in fields improve crop yields and water use efficiency and reduce wind erosion. Windbreaks planted in areas where livestock is kept help reduce climate stress on animals and feed consumption.

Silvopasture systems combine trees with forage and livestock production. This practice allows the landowner to gain income by harvesting the trees for products such as timber, nuts, fruits and even Christmas trees, while the livestock continues to graze on the under story plants and grasses.

Alley Cropping allows the producer to grow an agricultural crop in between widely spaced rows of trees. The agricultural crop provides for an annual income while the trees produce a long-term income. In this way the landowner can produce two types of crops at the same time in the same area.

In forest farming, high-value specialty crops are cultivated under the protection of a forest canopy that has been modified to provide a desired amount of shade. Forest farming provides an added income while trees are being grown for high-value wood products.

Riparian forest buffers are trees and vegetation which border water bodies such as streams, ponds and wetlands. These buffer zones help to reduce pollution of water ways and reduce erosion. These areas buffer water bodies from the negative impacts that may come for nearby agricultural lands.

Trees are essential for wildlife to survive. Among other things, trees provide food, territory and cover for animals. Trees provide seeds, berries, nuts and fruits. Many animals may eat the leaves, twigs, roots, buds, stems and lichens from the trees as well. In addition, tree canopies provide breeding, roosting, nesting and nurseries for many animals and their young. Working trees have value to wildlife beyond these reasons. Planting trees or allowing trees to remain in certain areas adds diversity and helps reconnect the landscape by creating travel corridors for wildlife.

So you see, trees are not only beautiful, but useful. Used as tools, trees provide many benefits to mankind and wildlife. People are attracted to areas with lots of trees. The term “green space” is utilized in the planning world and most folks will buy property in areas with green space as opposed to areas without it. Recreational activities are possible and enhanced by trees. Who wants to hike, bike, hunt or fish in an area with no trees? Trees also help to clear toxins from water and air, absorb runoff, reduce flooding and erosion, replenish oxygen and enrich and restore soil. And we know that trees provide a variety of benefits to wildlife including shelter, food and protection.

If you are interested in “putting trees to work” for you, please contact our office at (863) 402-6545. The information on agroforestry practices such as those above, was obtained from the USDA National Agroforestry Center, a partnership of the Natural Resources Conservation Service and publications are available through our office. Please visit our website at <http://www.highlandsswcd.org/>.