

# Wanda and Earl BARRS

## Inspire Others to Share Their Vision

By **BRIGITTE  
Johnson**

### 2006 BASF Outstanding Achievements in Sustainable Forestry Award



Earl and  
Wanda  
Barrs

L-R: Michelle Isenberg, Amie  
Dunn, Earl Barrs, Wanda  
Barrs, and Chuck Anderson.



*Editor's Note: The BASF Outstanding Achievements in Sustainable Forestry Award, a cooperative award between BASF Corp. and the American Tree Farm System, recognizes the superior stewardship and outreach activities of leaders in the forestry profession. This year's winners, Wanda and Earl Barrs, were selected by five independent judges to receive the award and the accompanying \$5,000 stipend. The Barrs received their award at the 2006 National Tree Farmer Convention in Mobile, Alabama, in October.*

**Sometimes people find their calling in life and it coincides with what they love. Earl and Wanda Barrs are two of these lucky people. They have blended their love of forestry, the outdoors, and education and have made a profound impact on their community. Together, they created not only a Tree Farm but a living, breathing example of good stewardship.**

The Barrs share their passion for sustainable forestry by using their 1,200-acre Tree Farm, Gully Branch, as an outdoor environmental classroom for students, educators, forestry professionals, and others. For 32 years the Barrs have merged their intense love of forestry and education to create learning opportunities that will impact their community for generations to come. Located in Cochran, Georgia, their certified Tree Farm is a diverse stand of loblolly and mixed upland and bottomland hardwoods, a 40-acre lake, several ponds, wetlands, and a haven for wildlife.

Wanda and Earl's story began in high school where they were high school sweethearts in Bleckley County,

Georgia. Following graduation from the University of Georgia, Earl with a bachelor of science degree in forest resource management, and Wanda with a degree in home economics education, they married.

Gully Branch Tree Farm represents a special place for the Barrs. This particular parcel of land had been sharecropped in the 1930s by Earl's great-grandfather and grandfather. However, when presented with the opportunity, they were unable to purchase the land. Decades later, in 1986, Earl purchased the initial 411 acres from a timber company, reclaiming that same land. During the next 14 years he and Wanda expanded Gully

Branch to its current size.

Wanda has taken her professional training in education and created a network of dedicated teachers and students whom she enlightened to the benefits of and the science behind sustainable forestry. As a forester, Earl, with Wanda at his side, manages his forestry consulting firm with the same intensity and focus as he does his own property. Their clients are advised of their stewardship responsibility and encouraged to support sustainable forestry through sound management practices and plans for sustainable growth.

Wanda's training as a Project Learning Tree® (PLT) facilitator gives her the tools to deliver quality environmental education. PLT, the national environmental education program of the American Forest Foundation, is highly regarded as one of the premiere environmental education programs in the country and abroad. Wanda was named a PLT National Outstanding Educator of the Year in 1996, Georgia PLT Educator of the Year in 1990 and 1995, and Georgia PLT Facilitator of the Year in 2001.

Gully Branch Tree Farm was one of the field day sites for the Georgia Teacher Conservation Workshop in 2005 and 2006. Sponsored by the Georgia Forestry Association, Earl and Wanda hosted these workshops that focused on conservation, sustainable forestry, wood products, and wildlife habitat management. Educators and professional foresters who explored Gully Branch Tree Farm as students are finding their way back and sharing their love of forestry with a new generation of students. During the 2005 field day, a middle school science teacher fondly remembered her participation in a pre-service PLT workshop as a college student five years earlier. Now she brings her students to the Tree Farm for their educational enrichment. It's extremely rewarding for Earl and Wanda to watch children experience Gully Branch and return as leaders in the classroom for future generations.

Every April is dedicated to forestry education field trips for students, teachers, and parents of Bleckley County Schools. Through this countywide initiative, thousands and thousands of children

and adults have enjoyed a wagon ride around the farm while learning the aspects of forest management.

The Barrs are also sustainable forestry advocates at the state level. Governor Sonny Perdue appointed Earl to the Georgia Economic Development Board in 2003. In this capacity, Earl created opportunities to engage state economic development partners and private and industrial forest landowners in discussions aimed at developing long term strategic plans for the future of forestry in Georgia. Earl also brings his balanced approach to forestry, land, water, and air quality to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources Board. Currently, Earl is working with leaders in power production and biomass research to promote a strong partnership for developing alternative uses for the tremendous supply of pulp generated in Georgia. He is also an active member of the Georgia Forestry Association's Board of Directors and Executive Committee.

In 2003, Wanda was appointed by Governor Perdue to the Georgia State

Board of Education and she now serves as its chair. She was a proponent for Georgia's Performance Standards in Science, which focus on doing science rather than viewing science. As part of her many responsibilities with educators and legislators, Wanda makes sure that sound educational principles, including science and environmental education, are at the heart of the discussion.

The Barrs are living their vision for Gully Branch — a living forest laboratory for promoting and growing a vital sustainable resource for present and future generations. The Barrs believe Georgia can be green while growing wood for products, creating wildlife habitat, conserving water, enhancing lands, and supporting a high quality of life for its citizens. 

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*Brigitte Johnson is executive editor of Tree Farmer Magazine and director of communications for the American Forest Foundation. Tim Lowrimore, director of forest policy for the Georgia Forestry Association Inc., also contributed to this article.*