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Magazine Articles: School's in Session at Gully Branch



School's in Session at Gully Branch

On 1,500 acres of Georgia forestland, Earl and Wanda Barrs have created an outdoor classroom that offers an experience like no other. Each year, hundreds of children and adults come to learn about sustainable forestry. And, for their commitment to the land, the Barrs have been honored with a

Sustainable Forestry Award from BASF and the American Tree Farm System®.

More than 30 years ago, Earl Barrs was just a man with a motorcycle. He would slowly ride past the house of one particularly pretty young woman, until one day she emerged and they started to talk.

Soon, they began taking Sunday rides out to the rural Georgia property Earl's family had crop-shared for generations. It was there that Earl and his future wife Wanda fished in the pond, strolled through the reforested pines and fell in love with the land and each other.

In the decades that followed, Earl and Wanda convinced the timber company that owned the land to sell it, piece by piece, to them. Now the familiar pond and forest near Cochran, Ga., is known as Gully Branch Tree Farm, a model of sustainable forestry that serves as a living classroom for hundreds of students and teachers every year.

More Than a Business

Working for an absentee landowner, Earl Barrs' grandfather and great-grandfather lived on and farmed the land that is now Gully Branch. After World War I, the land lay fallow and neglected, victim of the post-war agricultural depression. As forestry began taking root in the South during the late 1950s and 1960s, a timber company bought the land and planted pines. Though Earl didn't live on the land as a child, he grew up three miles away and spent his childhood hunting and fishing there.



Earl and Wanda both studied at the University of Georgia. Earl focused on forestry and Wanda majored in home economics, later earning a master's degree in early childhood education. After graduation, they married and Earl began a career in forestry.

Looking back, Earl ties his interest in forestry to the memories he, his family and Wanda formed on this land. "When you start out, you tend to take things for granted and don't necessarily understand all that's involved with stewardship and management," Earl Barrs said. "As you become older -

and wiser, I guess - your appreciation grows and you feel the responsibility of taking care of something that will be passed on for generations. It's more than just a business."

In 1986, Earl and Wanda purchased the land near Cochran and over time acquired all of the property Earl's family originally farmed, along with some adjacent forestland. The 1,500-acre Gully Branch property now includes loblolly plantations, natural loblolly stands, mixed stands of upland and bottomland hardwoods, ponds and a 40-acre lake.

Growing, Cutting and Planting Pines

As a practicing forester and president of Knapp-Barrs & Associates, Earl Barrs recommends his clients support sustainable forestry through sound management practices, regardless of their objectives.

At Gully Branch, the Barrs focus on wildlife, aesthetics and the forest as a classroom. Gum Swamp Creek, with large bottomland hardwood and wetland areas, creates a wildlife corridor through Gully Branch that Earl enjoyed as a young fisherman and hunter.

To support and encourage wildlife, the Barrs created and maintain supplemental food plots of wheat, lespedeza, clover, corn and fruit trees for deer, turkeys and quail. The Barrs also participate in the Georgia Bobwhite Quail Initiative by using recommended prescribed burning and mowing practices. The Barrs' pine management is focused on uneven-aged management and clear-cutting small areas for food plots.

"We have about four or five stands of different ages at Gully Branch, but most of the pine stands were planted in 1983 and thinned twice," Earl said. "My goal is to keep an older stand, and clear-cut and replant 20- to 40-acre patches, managing some tracts more intensively than others."

The Barrs use prescribed burning as an intensive management technique, spot burning on average every three years to keep brush under control and maintain wildlife habitat. The frequency of prescribed burns required to keep brush like privet, sweetgum and gallberry under control motivated the Barrs to research other options.

"For wildlife and access for educational purposes, we need a pine plantation without a lot of brush," Earl said. "Burning gives you great results for the year you burn, and maybe even a little after that, but after two years we can't tell we've burned."



To explore their options, last year the Barrs sprayed a number of areas with Chopper® herbicide, and several others with 2,4-D and Accord®. At first, the areas sprayed with 2,4-D and Accord looked good, but as BASF sales specialist Don Wardlaw points out, looks can be deceiving.

"You don't see Chopper results right away, but you see results from the 2,4-D and Accord almost immediately," Wardlaw said. "As a result, people assume that 2,4-D and Accord are doing a better job, but we know they're not."

Wardlaw explained that in areas with a lot of hardwoods, the long-term results of the 2,4-D and Accord treatments are similar to prescribed burning - increased hardwood stems and resprouting. The selective residual activity in Chopper works more slowly, providing a greater reduction of competing hardwood stems and an increase in beneficial species, such as legumes, rubus and native warm-season grasses, which

aid in wildlife biodiversity.

The Barrs are now incorporating chemical vegetation control into Gully Branch management based on their spraying tests.

Reforestation at Gully Branch is primarily natural regeneration, but pines have been planted in some areas. Ultimately, it is this cycle of planting, growing, harvesting and replanting that inspired the Barrs to make Gully Branch a forestry demonstration site.

"We saw a disconnect between the forest community and the general public," Wanda said. "The benefits of forestry to the community were simply not communicated to people. We realized that we had a different story to tell, one that connected us to sustainability. At Gully Branch, we show the science of sustainable forestry, so people make the connection between growing the trees, harvesting them and replanting them for future generations."

'Doing, Not Viewing, Science'

Through Gully Branch and Wanda's roots in science education, the Barrs saw an opportunity to teach people how forest and wildlife resources can be managed for the benefit of both landowners and communities.

In 1994, the Barrs opened their property to students in Bleckley County. Since these first field trips, more than 5,000 students from pre-kindergarten through high school, as well as 4-H and FFA groups and educators, have learned about sustainable forestry at Gully Branch.

About 900 students will visit Gully Branch in 2007 to learn about such topics as wildlife habitat, renewable energy, water conservation and Native American history through storytelling, games and hands-on activities.

Wanda leads the session on renewable resources, teaching students the difference between reusable, recyclable and renewable resources like trees with a forest management "game." Volunteer Buford Raffield uses songs, storytelling and artifacts to help students imagine living life in the forest hundreds of years ago. On wagon rides with Earl, visitors see firsthand how management at Gully Branch is balancing timber production, wildlife habitat and recreation.

Students also learn from volunteers from the Georgia Forestry Commission, Georgia-Pacific and the University of Georgia

Cooperative Extension.

What impact do these trips to Gully Branch have on the students? One fifth-grader who visited in 1997 as part of a class field trip returned to Gully Branch in 2005 to train as an educator, and began teaching in 2006. That student is now a leader in the classroom, teaching her students about sustainable forestry. This is exactly the Gully Branch legacy Earl and Wanda want to pass on to future generations.

"Over the past 30 years, my love for the land has appreciated constantly," Earl said. Today, on the spot he and Wanda visited via motorcycle years ago, stands a living classroom - a testament to what their love and hard work have built.

Silvopasture

The Barrs continue to explore management options for Gully Branch, including silvopasture, which combines the production of timber, forage and livestock. The goal of silvopasture is to manage all three components to generate regular income from forage and livestock, which supplements long-term, periodic income from timber sales. Private forest landowners seeking annual income and pine plantation owners who want to diversify income sources after a first commercial thinning can benefit from silvopasture.¹ Silvopasture contributes to timber production because grazing controls competing vegetation. Forage fertilization and livestock waste can enhance tree growth. Silvopasture also provides shelter for livestock, and can improve the overall aesthetic, wildlife and hunting aspects of a property. Silvopasture planning should focus on tree species, forage types, such as warm-season and cool-season grasses, and livestock selection, such as cattle, goats, horses or sheep.

For more information about silvopasture, visit the University of Florida Extension online at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

¹ Nowak, J., Blount, A., Workman, S. *Integrated Timber, Forage and Livestock Production - Benefits of Silvopasture*. This document is Circular 1430, one of a series of the School of Forest Resources and Conservation, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. First Published: December 2002. <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FR139>.

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