

Touch of Country in the City

By Tilda Mims, AFC Retired

Although patches of farmland still dot metropolitan areas of Alabama, it frequently falls prey to housing areas and commercial development. Sometimes agricultural practices aren't compatible with city life. Other times, farmers struggling to make ends meet find selling or leasing land to developers a painful but sound economic decision.

Maple Grove, a TREASURE Forest within the city limits of Muscle Shoals, is proof that with careful planning a landowner can successfully blend productive agricultural land into urban landscapes.

Through inheritance and purchases, Pat and Martha Staley acquired 189 acres of the old Pond Creek Plantation in Colbert County, which they leased for cotton farming. In 1993, they learned the area had been designated as highly erodible, and farming row crops was no longer an acceptable practice for the land. Determined to keep the tract in their family, the Staleys began exploring ways to make it productive while minimizing soil erosion. Wayne Winstead, a forestry specialist for the Alabama Forestry Commission, introduced them to the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), a cost-share program for converting cropland into forestland.

The site index on the property – a measure of the potential of a forest site to grow timber – ranked yellow-poplar and loblolly pine as equally productive, so they decided to go with yellow-poplar. The old cotton land had to be disked and subsoiled before planting, and they used a pre-emerge herbicide.

“We just wanted something different,” said Pat. “We planted 89 acres of yellow-

poplar on 10x10 spacing back in 1993 under the CRP program and have been tickled with the result.” Eleven years later, the typical yellow-poplar measures 7.5 inches in diameter and 40 feet tall. Also thriving are about 60 nuttall oaks and a stand of maples planted by their son, Patrick, which earned the land its nickname of Maple Grove.



Photo by Tilda Mims

(L to R) Johnnie Everitt, AFC Colbert County Manager, Martha Staley, Pat Staley, John-Patrick McCrary, Terry McCrary, and Patrick Staley. Not pictured are the Staley's daughter, Karen Collins and her son Michael, who also enjoy visits to the farm.

Today, the once fallow land is a highly productive TREASURE Forest managed for timber and wildlife. It is also a certified Tree Farm. Wildflowers abound amid the diversity of Maple Grove. Wetlands, shade, and sun promote a palette of color: jewelweed, oakleaf hydrangea, and spider lilies, among others. Regular bushhogging on the farm yields multiple advantages for the Staleys. Mowing between the rows of yellow-poplar reduces competing vegetation to promote tree growth. Disturbing

the soil also promotes fresh vegetation attractive to many animals, including woodcocks and three species of quail. Bushhogging also encourages reseeding of many native wildflowers.

Two ponds stocked with bass, bream, and crappie are fun recreational sites and offer a continuous watering source for wildlife. Permanent firelanes and well-designed walking trails present comfortable access for management and recreation. The Staleys like to get together whenever they can for a day of motorcycle riding and picnicking – just spending some family time together on the family farm, according to Pat.

The doors are always open to guests, particularly children with no experience in the forest. Pat is the driving force behind the Classroom in the Forest (CIF) program in Colbert County. His family hosted the Colbert County ATFA Chapter's first CIF at Maple Grove. Unwelcome guests are a rarity these days. Once they had a significant problem with trespassers, especially ones on four-wheelers, but Pat said, “Thanks to Mike Lanier, we are rid of them.” Mike is a forestry specialist in Colbert County with law enforcement responsibilities in the area.

Tucked away among residential and commercial property along a major roadway in Muscle Shoals, Maple Grove is a welcome neighbor easily identified by a prominent TREASURE Forest sign. Vivid fall foliage and brilliant wildflowers in an excellent hardwood stand allow adjoining landowners and passers-by to see that carefully designed forest management provides multiple-benefits in any vicinity. ☸