A Labor of Love

By Elishia Ballentine
Editor

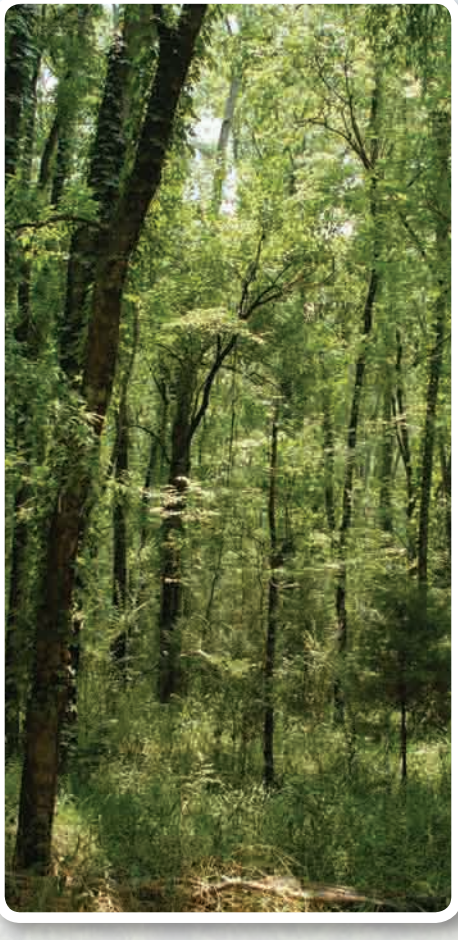
Often, life seems to be moving along smoothly in one direction, when suddenly . . . an event happens providing the catalyst to push it in another direction. Such was the case with the Besh family of Sumter County. Looking back, Marilyn said she and husband John had always loved trees, but neither ever dreamed that timber would one day be the heart of their Alabama farm rather than beef cattle. Nor did they envision that their tree farm would not only become a TREASURE Forest, but also be named one of the prestigious Helene Mosley Memorial Award winners for stewardship in 2006.

Cattle farming was an occupation that John really enjoyed, until he broke his leg in a four-wheeler accident in the summer of 1991. As the injury limited his activity, running the cattle operation became more difficult. The time had come for a change . . . the launch of a new endeavor . . . forestry! Where he had previously built fences to keep in cows, he now took fences down . . . that following spring, instead of watching the birth of

Photos by Tim Washburne, AFC

new calves in their herd, they started planting loblolly pines.

The property had come full circle. Originally in timber, someone had converted it to cotton during the ’40s and ’50s. It reverted back to timber for a short while, before the next owner row cropped soybeans in the ’60s and early ’70s. Then in 1973 the Besh family moved to Livingston, as John was managing partner with a group of investors. They soon turned the farm into pasture land to begin their cattle enterprise, first leasing the farm in the ’80s, then buying the 700 acres outright in 1989. Finally in 1992, once again, timber would reign.



In the beginning of course, most of the land was open pasture; only 40 acres of the 700 was in timber. The Beshes did most of the site prep work themselves, but contracted the actual tree planting. Today, composition of the forestland is 90 percent pine plantation – 20 years old – and 10 percent hardwood. John commented that they considered the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) a wonderful cost-share program. [CRP falls under the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), administered by the USDA Farm Service Agency, with technical assistance provided by the USDA Forest Service and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.] “It provided us with a God-given opportunity to establish our forest and wildlife. It allowed us to enter the timber industry . . . in terms of acreage, we may not have been able to do so otherwise.”

Earning TREASURE Forest certification in 1994, their primary objective was timber production. In addition to timber management techniques such as thinning and prescribed burning, one of their main goals was to not just control but *eradicate* invasive species such as privet and Chinese tallow tree. The method employed in combating tropical soda apple on the property was to spray herbicides using backpacks while riding ATVs down every third row of trees. This rather labor intensive task was completed maybe ten times each summer.

Their secondary objective was wildlife enhancement. Back when cows were grazing the property, they only occasionally saw deer and there were not many turkeys. Today they have noticed a substantial increase in the deer population, turkey numbers are improving, and there is also an abundance of small game. This success is attributed to numerous wildlife varieties: 1,200 sawtooth oaks, Chinese chestnuts, and autumn olives alternated with filberts (hazelnut). Each fall they plant clover, wheat, and rye for winter crops. Each spring in those same fields, they “no-till” iron-clay peas and grain sorghum.

For quail, they use bi-color lespedeza. As pine plantations are opened up by future thinnings, the quantity of quail is expected to rise.

An area is also maintained for ducks. A dam was installed, allowing the flatland leading to the river to flood each November. Then in late spring or early summer, this six-acre “duck pond” is drained.

There are two recreational ponds on the property as well, stocked with bass and bream. The first was built in 1974 for erosion control. The second was created in 1984 to provide water for the cattle. With the property bordering the Sucarnochee River, John noted that water quality and filtration had always been crucial elements of their farm. His father had instilled in him the classic principle of stewardship: “Always leave a place better than you found it, or you shouldn’t have been there.”

John Besh believes that whatever your endeavor, it is important to learn all that you can. He was grateful for the forestry advice received over the years from gentlemen farmers such as Miles Mayberry and Clinton McClure, both foresters who were TREASURE Forest landowners as well. When the Beshes had admired McClure’s beautiful forest, he’s the one who had first recommended they look into the TREASURE Forest program. Then there was Gary Fortenberry who had advised to plant nuttall oaks in the lower areas. Now, those oaks are over 50 feet high - taller than all the pines, as well as the power lines. They were amazed to discover how quickly the oaks had grown. And neighbors Bob and Becky Williams had proven to be invaluable resources through the years.

Additionally, information was garnered from the county Alabama Forestry Commission, as well as other natural resources professionals and landowners John met during over 30 years of involvement with the Soil & Water Conservation District. He was also appreciative of recommendations over the years from other forest landowners with the local chapters of the Alabama TREASURE Forest Association and Forestry Planning Committee, noting how Sumter County was unique in that these

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two organizations had been combined into one. Their quarterly meetings consist of a short business segment; more time is devoted to landowner tours with a focus on exchange of ideas and expertise.

Just as John and Marilyn feel fortunate to have received advice from experienced landowners, they are willing to share their knowledge. They have enjoyed hosting a couple of county TREASURE Forest tours, high school-aged students from Alabama Forestry Camp, and fifth graders encountering "Classroom in the Forest." Challenged to do some forestry decision making, the students were allowed to pick and mark 25 trees with ribbons that needed to be taken out of the forest.

In making their property available, the Beshes provide an opportunity for others to learn about the advantages of timber growth and timber management, as well as issues such as carbon sequestration and water quality.

Perhaps the greatest reward of all is welcoming home their five children and eight grandchildren for holidays and visits. With all of them now living at least two hours away, they love coming back to the farm and hunting, or just watching wildlife. "Although each one showed steers in 4-H while growing up, no one was overly sentimental about the cows," Marilyn commented. "All of them seem genuinely happy with the change from cattle business to timber enterprise. They have a real love of the home-place and the land itself. We feel pretty confident they will carry on the legacy."

When asked why they continued to work so hard, both John and Marilyn agreed that it was indeed a labor of love. Watching the trees grow made it all worthwhile.

Photos by Tim Washburne, AFC