



The Hard Decision about Managing Hardwoods

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The hardwood forest type is a tremendous resource across the South. The Southern hardwood forest provides for an abundant wildlife habitat. Many species, both game and non-game, depend on hardwood forests for their growth and survival. A few of these are wild turkey, squirrel, wood duck, raccoon, and several species of songbirds.

The Southern hardwood forest also provides a multitude of benefits to society that we often take for granted. Some of these benefits include clean water filtered from thousands of acres of riparian forest, fall color providing natural beauty that supports tourism, and recreational opportunities such as camping and hiking.

Diverse is a word that describes the Southern hardwood forest. There are approximately 200 species of hardwoods native to Alabama, as compared to only 13 species of native conifers.

Regardless of the hardwood stumpage prices, timber owners might be wise to consider hardwood management. But before converting a pine plantation to hardwoods or beginning an extensive afforestation practice, you might want to consider a few questions.

Is my land classified as one of the three broad groups suitable for hardwoods?

In a previous article in Alabama's TREASURED Forest magazine, Hardwood Specialist Tom Cambre identified three broad groups of land: major bottomland sites, minor bottomland sites, and upland hardwood sites. If you can answer "yes" to this question, then keep moving forward. You might need to consult with your local forester to get a definitive answer.

Ok, let's say you passed the initial test. You own some land that is classified in one of the three broad groups suitable for hardwood timber, and there is timber on the site. Let's consider the next important question.

What is the current stand condition?

Is the current stand in a degraded state, commonly called high-graded? Assessing the current species composition, quality, and stocking level will help you determine if you should attempt to manage what you have or consider some other options for treatment of a degraded stand. Dr. Wayne Clatterbuck with the University of Tennessee has developed a technical publication entitled, "Treatments for Improving Degraded Hardwood Stands," which is available online at: utextension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/SP680.pdf

If your hardwood stand is fully stocked and contains desirable species (mainly red oak and white oak) then a practice called Crop Tree Release (CTR) should be considered. CTR is the practice of deadening selected trees in younger, overstocked forests for the benefit of releasing desirable crop trees. The CTR publication, written by David Mercker, Ph.D., CF, Extension Forester, University of Tennessee, is also available online at: utextension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/SP559.pdf

I cannot stress enough the importance of getting an accurate assessment of the current condition before making a decision to cut, thin, or treat the stand. There are many treatment options. Far too often, landowners are only given a few options and they usually focus on *clear-cut it now, or leave it alone and let it grow for another ten years.*

The last and most difficult question to answer is this: **Am I ready to take on the challenge of managing hardwoods?**

Managing hardwoods is difficult. It is a technical process that requires an acute understanding of soil types, site quality, species characteristics, and the interaction of all of these variables and the combination of multiple species.

Answering "yes" to this question can be a hard decision to make. Often it is easier to decide to clear-cut, spray, and plant pines.

Conifer or pine management is usually best achieved with intensive chemical site preparation to remove competition, followed by artificial regeneration or tree planting. Hardwood management is best achieved by managing existing stands of hardwoods, and planning for natural regeneration. That is not to say that planting hardwood seedlings is not feasible; it often is. We recommend it on thousands of acres each year, but this is usually successful in open fields, idle pastures, and agricultural lands where no trees are present.

Planting hardwood seedlings in a cutover situation is usually not very successful due to the intense competition from seed, advanced regeneration, and stump sprouts. In short, natural regeneration is the best method for regenerating hardwoods, but years of planning are sometimes required to achieve the desired results. Very few landowners are pleased with a privet jungle or a sweet gum thicket which can occur without proper planning.

However, with proper planning, existing hardwood stands can be improved even if they are in a degraded state. Quality stands can be improved to increase productivity of the desired species, and mature stands can be prepared for natural regeneration.

Managing hardwoods is not for the casual land manager. It requires a determination and dedication to learning new things about soils, site selection, species composition, and new timber stand improvement practices. This is a hard decision to make, but if you make it, you will probably not regret it.☺

Example of a poor quality red oak with defects and poor form.



Example of a quality cherrybark oak with a straight bole and good form.

