

FORESTRY IN THE BLACKBELT:

Planting Trees on Prairie Soils

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Occasionally someone calls the Montgomery/Lowndes office of the Alabama Forestry Commission and says, "I have this pasture or open land that I am not using. I want to plant trees on it . . . what do I need to do?"

The first step when planting trees on a large scale is to evaluate the soils. The easiest way to determine your soil type is to check a soil mapping site, such as the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service 'soils' website. A 'web soil survey' can be found at <http://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov>

Most forest soils in Alabama and the Southeast are acidic, which means they have a pH that is below 7. ['pH' is the symbol or numeric scale used to specify the acidity or alkalinity of a substance.] If the soil pH is above 7, the soil is basic [or alkaline], and pine trees will not live or will do very poorly.

The Blackbelt Region of Central Alabama is home to what are commonly called 'prairie' soils, many of which are basic and will not grow a pine tree. The most common prairie soils include Sumter, Oktibbeha, and Leeper. Other prairie soils can be found such as Hannon, Kipling, Vaiden, Minter, and Catalpa.

Prairie soils that *will* grow pines include Oktibbeha, Hannon, Kipling and Vaiden. Oktibbeha and Hannon are usually found on uplands, while Kipling and Vaiden are typically bottomland soils. Some prairie soils will grow hardwoods, such as Leeper, Catalpa,

and Minter. Sumter soil is not suitable for any trees except eastern red cedar.

A quick and easy way to determine if pines will grow on an upland prairie site is to look at the ant beds. If the soil is red, it will grow a pine; if the soil is yellow or white, pines will not grow on it.

Some areas will be mapped as a complex. A Sumter/Oktibbeha complex means that about 55 percent is Sumter and the other 45 percent is Oktibbeha. This means that slightly less than half of the area will grow a pine tree. These soils should be avoided if your goal is timber production, since roughly half of the stand will not survive.

Another consideration is, what are your goals for the stand? If you are planting seedlings for future income, you will need a minimum of 25-30 acres of trees in order to harvest the stand in the future. If you are planting for wildlife or cover, any acreage will do.

Still trying to decide what to do? Call your Alabama Forestry Commission county forester or a consulting forester that is experienced in working in the Blackbelt.☎

Get the Dirt on Dirt: Everything you ever wanted to know about ****SOILS****, and then some, can be found at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/soils/home>.