

Forest trails serve many purposes. They can be used for recreation and walking, as firelanes, for wildlife openings and to supply access for timber inspections or logging.

EVALUATION: The first step in setting up a trail system on your property is to evaluate the trails that you already have. Do they fit in with the natural features of the tract? Are there special features or areas that you wish to show off? These features can include bluff areas or overlooks, pond sites, wildlife openings, waterfalls, unusual trees or land features, old house or mill sites, abandoned mines or just pretty stands of trees that you enjoy visiting. A good trail system should give access to all scenic features.

DESIGN: The best trail design is the closed loop layout, beginning and ending at about the same location. Avoid a "connect the dots" layout. Instead, mark the trail so that it will make easy walking. Side loops can be attached to give access to worthwhile subjects off the main path.

Avoid straight lines. Trails with curves and forks at frequent intervals inject an atmosphere of remoteness and exploration to the visitor. Post signs at trail junctions showing the way to important features. Trail names can be developed and posted to aid the visitor in finding their way. The side trails give the visitor the option of how much time he wants to spend in the woods.

CONSTRUCTION: Trail construction does not need to be an elaborate production. Clean the right-of-way for main trails to about 8 – 10 feet wide and trim overhanging branches to a height of ten feet. On side trails, a narrower pathway of 4 – 6 is good enough. Construction can be mechanical (bulldozer, farm disking or bush-hogging) or by hand. Use mechanical construction carefully to avoid damage to adjacent trees and sensitive areas. Hand clearing is more expensive but less damaging.

Install water bars, slightly raised mounds of soil that channel rainwater off the trail at an angle, on slopes and near creeks. Where possible, trails should follow the contours of the land. An average grade of 10% is about the best for comfortable walking. Steep trail slopes are not only hard to walk, they also have more erosion problems. The maximum trail slope is 20% - one foot rise for every five feet traveled - and only for short stretches.

On wet sites or over sensitive areas, construct boardwalks to aid access and minimize damage. Boardwalks can be made of a variety of materials. It is recommended that only preservative treated wood be used for longer trail life.

Try to avoid wet soils. Muddy areas can become very mucky, causing considerable sedimentation to the water system, and are much harder to maintain. If you must cross streams, use a bridge or ford with firm soils or crushed rock.



The surface of the trail can vary. Unless the trail is also used as a firelane, a light layer of litter gives the most soil protection. Wood chips or pea gravel can also be used to cover trail beds. It is not recommended to pave trails unless very heavy use is expected. For many people the presence of concrete or asphalt takes away from the natural appearance of the woods.

FEATURES: Trails should show off the good features of your property but in an unobtrusive way. Woodland openings, such as food plots or meadows, are excellent places for observing wildlife. It is best if trails skirt openings, using natural cover to help "hide" the visitor from any wildlife. An observation blind of simple wood panel or woven wood slats provides good wildlife observation.

Forest management areas should also be included. Erect signs explaining work done at a site. Thinning areas and even small clearcuts are interesting. Building a simple gazebo at the site can enhance scenic overlooks. This structure invites the visitor to rest and admire the view. It also provides a point of shelter from sudden summer thunderstorms. You may gain tremendous satisfaction from showcasing your property and your stewardship to other landowners that visit your property.

If the public may access your trails, then you must consider your liabilities. Do you have liability insurance coverage for injuries incurred? Do you need to post warning signs or no trespass signs?

MAINTENANCE: Trails should be checked regularly. Any erosion problems should be corrected. Waterbars can be used to slow water flow and minimize erosion on the trails. Once or twice a year prune trees and shrubs one to two feet from trail edges. Check for any adjacent or overhanging hazards.

Photo Credit: Alabama Forestry Commission



This information is provided by the Alabama Forestry Commission

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