

Walt & Donna Lange Named 2010 Ohio Tree Farmers of the Year

By Tom Collins, Nominating Tree Farm Inspector

ODNR - Division of Forestry

Looking for their little piece of paradise, Donna and Walt Lange bought a 33-acre farm in rural Northwest Ohio back in 1966. The property consisted of 14 acres of native hardwood forest, 17 acres of cropland, and a 2-acre home site. Walt and Donna's tree planting began in 1972 when a windbreak utilizing Eastern white pine and autumn olive was planted to prevent the sandy crop soil from blowing and drifting into the adjacent road much as snow does in the winter. In 1988 additional windbreaks were planted.

One of the windbreaks bisected the 17-acre crop field which the farmer who was farming the crop ground decided made the fields too small to farm efficiently with modern equipment. This prompted Walt and Donna to begin a reforestation effort. In 1993 and 1994 approximately 8,000 trees including a variety of oaks, walnut, cherry, spruce, pine — and bald Cypress for wet areas — were planted. Walt began to prune and thin the plantation in 2004, a project that continues today.

Forest management on the 14-acre woods on the original property started with an extensive grapevine problem in 1972. A number of access/hiking trails were also established at this time. Between 1985 and 1993 crop tree release and cull tree removal practices were done on the woods. Typical of the woodlands in the Oak Openings Region, the Lange's woods contained a low, seasonally wet area. Construction of a driveway crossover caused the area to retain too much water. The excessively wet soil and a strong wind resulted in 18 trees being uprooted. These trees were salvaged utilizing a portable band sawmill on site. The site was developed into a green tree marsh in 1993 with the help of the Fulton SWCD and the ODNR Division of Wildlife. This allowed Walt to regulate the water and prevent the extended soil saturation that contributed to the uprooting of trees during wind events.

A timber sale was conducted in the woods in 2003. This was the time Emerald Ash Borer was first discovered in Ohio. Two ash trees in the woods were determined to be infested with EAB by the Ohio Department of Agriculture. These ash trees were destined to be confiscated and destroyed by ODA. Extensive negotiations with ODA eventually resulted in Walt being able to process the logs on-site. The logs were sawn for lumber with all waste being burned. This was the first case in Ohio where ash logs were allowed to be processed into lumber rather than being run through the chipper.

A second parcel was purchased in 1996. This property contained 14 acres of tillable ground, 3 acres of mature woods, and 6 acres that is in natural reversion to forestland. Five acres of the tillable land was planted to windbreaks, almost 6 acres was planted as a riparian buffer, and the remaining 3 acres went into wetland restoration.

Walt and Donna have been very active in the Ohio Tree Farm Program. They have also served on the National Tree Farm Operating Committee and the Outreach and Education Committee. Walt is President of the Ohio Forestry Association, and was appointed by Gov. Ted Strickland to the state's Forestry Advisory Council. He has served four years on the American Farm Bureau Forestry Advisory Committee.

They have opened their Tree Farm numerous times to host Boy Scouts, 4-H groups, Woodland Steward's Program, woodland & wildlife workshops, and various agencies for educational purposes.

Not only did the Lange's find their piece of paradise back in 1966, through their hard work and perseverance they have since nurtured it into the 2010 Ohio Tree Farm of the Year.