



HOLDEN
FORESTS &
GARDENS

Ways to Love a Forest

Stories of Woodland Stewardship in Northeast Ohio



WORKING WOODS
HOLDEN FORESTS & GARDENS

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What does it mean to be a good steward?

If you are like many forest lovers in Northeast Ohio, you may feel that the best way to steward a landscape is to leave it alone. Perhaps you learned at a young age to view human impacts on the land as generally negative – something to reduce as much as possible. Maybe practices like hunting or harvesting timber seem exploitative, or perhaps the current ecological challenges seem too big for any one person to make a difference.

These ideas are powerful – but they tell an incomplete story. In 2018, a small team of natural resource professionals, educators, and scientists at Holden Forests & Gardens set out to change the narrative of forest stewardship in the region, and the Working Woods Hub was born. Today, the team cares

for a public learning forest at the Holden Arboretum in Kirtland, Ohio, and offers a variety of programs and services for land stewards throughout the region.

In working with a wide diversity of land stewards, it became clear that forest stewardship, or “ways to love a forest,” can take many forms – and that we have so much to learn from each other! In these pages, you’ll find four categories, each containing stories of individuals, families, and communities who exemplify a specific type of forest care. We at HF&G hope that their words serve as a source of motivation and guidance on your own stewardship journey, and that they inspire gratitude for the many gifts that Ohio forests provide.

- Annie Weight, Forestry Outreach Fellow
Holden Forests & Gardens 2025

“We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”
- Aldo Leopold, American writer and conservationist

Foundations of Forest Stewardship: Key Concepts for Getting Started

As long as humans have lived in Ohio, we have impacted forests.

Though understanding of Ohio's Indigenous history continues to evolve, current records note the historical presence of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Myaamia, Peoria, Shawnee, Wyandotte, Erie, and ancient Whittlesey peoples.¹ Members of these groups and nations – and their ancestors – have interacted with the landscape for millennia through game management, maple sugaring, fruit and nut cultivation, the harvest of materials to build and heat homes, and many other practices.

These practices reflect a role that humans have played for thousands of years – that of ecosystem engineer. Like beavers, elephants, woodpeckers, and prairie dogs, we are a species with an outsized ability to modify our environment and impact the organisms around us. Many human groups throughout time have done so within the limits of their environments, while others have made choices that led to ecosystem collapse. Either way, this means that “untouched forest” is likely a myth in a place like Ohio.

A healthy woodland is a process, not a destination.

If a landscape contains 200-year-old trees, is it an “old growth forest”? Not necessarily. Land stewards typically use the terms “old growth” or “mature” to describe a woodland that is operating with all the pieces of a healthy old growth *system*. This means that all the stages in a tree's life cycle are well-represented: tall, robust canopy trees, a diverse understory of shrubs and saplings, native seedling regeneration, and decomposing **snags** and downed trees on the forest floor.

Ohio forests are experiencing many challenges.

At the time of colonization, Europeans forcibly displaced many of the region's Native inhabitants and began to clear Ohio forests for agriculture and timber products. By 1940, widescale logging had reduced forest cover from 95% to an all-time low of 12%.²

Since then, many abandoned parcels of farmland have reverted back to woods, resulting in about 30% forest cover today.³ More forest cover is great news – but the disturbances of the last two centuries have been so dramatic that these newly reforested lands often lack many pieces of a healthy forest ecosystem. The canopy of a forest that grew from an old farm field is often comprised of tightly packed trees that are low in age and species diversity, with an understory dominated by **invasive** shrubs that can easily thrive in damaged post-agricultural soils.

Northeast Ohio forests are also facing intense **deer pressure**, more frequent droughts and severe windstorms brought on by climate change, and a high number of pests and pathogens.

To “let nature take its course” may not be helpful.

Many land stewards agree that not all forests should be actively managed – some are able to sustain an old-growth system on their own, contain important cultural sites, or are otherwise set apart as sacred or special in some way. But what about a young, crowded, post-agricultural woodland? If left alone, would it eventually become a healthy, old-growth forest? Possibly – but it could take hundreds of years or more.

This is where **forestry** – the art and science of cultivating, conserving, and utilizing forests through responsible management – comes in. Natural resource professionals and land stewards alike are continuing to develop and implement forest management strategies that address a myriad of ecological and economic challenges. The good news is, common management practices usually fulfill multiple goals at once – whether that is wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, cleaner waterways, income, recreation, overall forest health, or something else entirely.

A variety of professionals can help you achieve your goals

You are not alone! Here's a quick rundown of who's who in forest and tree care:

- **Foresters** should be your first contact when considering a timber harvest or other significant management action. They are experts in woodland care who are trained to help you reach your goals without compromising the health of your forest.
 - **Service foresters** provide free support to those in their service area. Find who is assigned to you by searching online for “ODNR State Service Forester Directory,” or call the ODNR office at (877) 247-8733.
 - **Consulting foresters** provide forestry services like personalized **management plans** and/or timber marking for a fee.

- **Timber buyers** typically purchase “standing timber” (trees marked for harvest) and then bring a crew in to cut them. A forester can help you select the right buyer for you.

- **Loggers** carry out the actual felling and logging of trees. They may work alone, or for a timber buyer or mill. A forester can help ensure that a logger uses responsible practices that protect your soil and forest from unnecessary damage.

- **Urban foresters** specialize in the care of urban canopy in densely populated areas like cities or suburbs.

- **Arborists** specialize in the care of individual trees and can help with pruning, disease treatment, and street tree removal.

The love of forests can transcend difference.

One of the quickest ways to connect with someone is to listen to their story. Whether through triumphs and failures or hopes and inspirations, you may be surprised at how much you have in common. This is especially true in the field of forest stewardship, where a shared love of land has the power to bring people of vastly different backgrounds together. It is this idea that guides the following pages, and it is this idea that can transform our forests and communities.

How to use this booklet:

Bolded words are important forestry terms to know. Their definitions can be found at the end of the booklet (p. 38).

Green boxes contain top tips and lessons learned from the individuals featured in this booklet.

Banners on the bottom of each page contain resources and partners that may be useful for your own forest stewardship journey.

1. *These are nations who signed Ohio treaties in the 18th and 19th centuries, as acknowledged by the Cleveland Museum of Art and their Native American advisory committee. Many Indigenous people continue to reside in Ohio, representing these nations and many others (see p. 20). Read more at clevelandart.org/about-museum/indigenous-peoples-and-land-acknowledgment*

2. *Diller, O. D. (Ed.) (1944). Ohio's forest resources: Progress report based on a survey conducted during 1939-1943 (pp. 73, 87). Forestry Publication No. 76. Wooster, OH. The Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station.*

3. *Albright, T. A., et al. (2018.) Ohio forests: 2016 (p. 1). Newtown Square, PA. USDA Forest Service.*

Seek & Share Knowledge



*“In the end, we will
conserve only what we
love, we will love only
what we understand, and
we will understand only
what we are taught.”
- Baba Dioum, Senegalese
forestry engineer*

This section is full of people who have dedicated their lives to asking questions about forest landscapes and then sharing what they learn. You'll also find wisdom from Joe and Christel Diliberto, a couple committed to telling their story in order to help landowners make informed decisions about timber.

The individuals in the following pages invite us to learn the names of local trees, mushrooms, frogs, bugs, and wildflowers, to seek out community conservation programs, and to consider fungal networks and tiny pathogens when we are out in the woods. In short, they invite us to take the first step of stewardship: Get to know the landscape.

Judy Semroc

Field biologist, naturalist, and advocate for wild spaces; passionate about community nature education that inspires action
State of Ohio



Few have had as great an impact on the field of Northeast Ohio conservation as Judy Semroc. Co-author of two natural history guides, board member of several conservation organizations, and founder of Nature Spark, a small business that provides biological property surveys, nature education, and conservation consulting, Judy's lifework is to inspire others to love and care for the natural world. And in Northeast Ohio, that often means working in and educating about forest ecosystems.

"I'm trying to get [people] to understand that we are not the only species on this planet," Judy explains. "All the other species in the forest have the right to

be there and conduct their lives too!" When Judy gives educational presentations at libraries or for community groups, she often uses a recent photo collection of hers, Faces of Conservation, to drive this idea home.

The collection consists of close-up photos of small, often unnoticed characteristics of plants and animals – such as the eyes of a gray tree frog. She hopes it helps others to realize that forests and other natural areas are not just stagnant spaces full of resources to exploit, but rather vibrant and diverse systems of beauty, life, and complex relationships – right under our noses.

When we look more closely at the natural world, we might also see behavior we recognize. "I can flip a log over on the forest floor and find a female centipede, curled up, with all her legs covering her eggs," Judy says. "That is her protective behavior ... [Humans also have] these instincts, and that can teach us about what's really important in life."



A centipede and her eggs

Drawing attention to specific species and how we relate to them can have very tangible impacts on Ohio forest stewardship, like when Judy works with conservation organizations to conduct biological inventory surveys. She explains: "A lot of **land conservancies** and park districts are able to protect land [if it includes] rare habitat and rare species ... [so] I'll walk a property and make a list of everything I see. If rare things are found, I do the reporting, take all the pictures and report back to them ... They can use that information to [apply for] grants to help them preserve that property."

Judy is clear-eyed about the conservation challenges that lie ahead, however. "The problem is big. In many cases, public lands we thought would always be protected are no longer sacred. But the power of the people is the only way ... things can change. I just can't quit fighting to get people as jazzed about it as possible!"

One of the most impactful ways to get people on board is through young people, Judy explains. "Get kids outside!" she advises parents and educators. "When I see young people getting really excited about [the natural world], it gives me hope."

As for the rest of us, Judy suggests starting small, like by becoming acquainted with the forest wildlife around us through apps like iNaturalist. "This is a really easy way for people to start," she says. "It can be enough of an impetus to seek out other areas or places to lend a hand. I'm not asking people to be a nature geek to my degree, but to be one to any degree would be wonderful."

She shares her overall hope that once we begin to truly see the world around us, whether in the forest or in our backyards, we will care a bit more about our impacts and become courageous enough to advocate for forest protection in our own communities. And if we're lucky, we'll become a bit of a nature geek in the process, too.

Learn more:

Sign up for the OSU Woodland Stewards email list for Ohio-specific webinars, workshops, and programs. To explore more of Judy's work, visit naturesparkohio.com.



A gray tree frog, a common amphibian in Ohio

Where can I get involved?

- Find out what events are being hosted in your area: check land conservancies, park districts, nature centers, soil and water conservation districts, and/or your local Audubon Society
- Browse Facebook for wildlife-specific groups that interest you (anything from raptors to amphibians to mosquitoes!)
- Download a wildlife identification app like iNaturalist, Pl@ntNet, or Merlin Bird ID and get outside!

Claudia Bashian-Victoroff

Fungal ecologist, soil health research specialist, PhD student, mushroom forager | *Lake County*



Fungi are having a bit of a moment in popular culture, but Claudia Bashian-Victoroff was an early fan. “I took soil ecology [as an undergraduate],” they explain. “And the first time I ever heard the words ‘mycorrhizal fungi,’ I was like, that’s what I’m going to do with my life.”

Mycorrhizae are a type of fungus that form symbiotic relationships with the roots of a host plant. The fungus occupies the plant’s root tissues, which then supply the fungus with photosynthesized energy. In turn, the fungus provides mineral nutrients from the soil that the host plant can’t absorb on its own. The vast majority of plants form fungal partnerships (it’s estimated that each one lives symbiotically with at least six fungal species), and mycorrhizal fungi networks can span an entire forest floor, exchanging and recycling nutrients across the ecosystem.

It was this idea of mutualism in the soil – the fact that so many mycorrhizal relationships have evolved to the point where the fungus cannot survive without its

specific host plant and the plant struggles to thrive without nutrients provided by the fungus – that captured Claudia’s attention. Fast-forward a few years, and they now work as a fungal ecologist at the Holden Arboretum, where their research centers around monitoring and investigating mycorrhizal species diversity and function, as well as the use of soil fungi in **urban canopy** restoration efforts.

What role can fungi actually play in something like urban canopy restoration? Claudia shares that they are exploring the use of soil transfer to introduce fungal partnerships into areas where the fungal community has been degraded in some way – like in city parks or urban neighborhoods – with the aim of increasing the resilience of that ecosystem.

Ultimately, Claudia believes, fungi can remind us of essential principles for any type of forest stewardship. “Biodiversity breeds resiliency. Even genetic diversity within a species makes that organism more resilient,” they explain. “[And] interactions are everything, you know? No one organism exists in a vacuum ... [They all] depend on one another.” Claudia concludes, “You [can’t] do conservation unless you think about the context in which organisms live, and all the other interactions that are important for [their] lifeways.”

How do I learn about fungi in my area?

Short answer: Walk slowly in old forests!

Long answer:

- Find a basic field guide
- Pick one spot to revisit again and again throughout the seasons
- Approach fungi that you already know like old friends! Take the time to greet them by name so you don’t forget them
- Approach new fungi with curiosity and try to find out what they are – just getting to know the fungi on one loop in the woods will keep you busy for plenty of time

Mary Pitts

Naturalist, biologist, forest health research specialist. Steward of a partly unmown lawn where all the neighborhood crickets, toads & foxes love to hang out | *Lake County*



Visible impacts of beech leaf disease

Mary grew up in an urban area of North Carolina without a lot of access to the woods, but when the time came for her to complete a high school internship, she chose to pursue environmental science. The school had never placed an intern in that field before, but they found a county conservation office that was happy to host Mary. “That internship really propelled me,” Mary explains. “I was their very first intern and my boss became my mentor. He’s been on this [entire] journey with me.”

The next step on that journey was to obtain an undergraduate degree in natural sciences. She later worked several jobs with various land management agencies across the western US, but found that she couldn’t stop asking questions about her work. “You start to wonder, why do we manage this way?” she shares. “Could management be more informed?” This led to a master’s degree in biology and eventually, a lab position at the Holden Arboretum, where she was hired to research beech leaf disease (BLD).

BLD is one of many factors that are seriously impacting forest health in Northeast Ohio, along with pests like the hemlock woolly adelgid and emerald ash borer. Their existence, however, is nothing novel. “Pathogens and disease [in the forest] are natural,” Mary explains. “It’s just like us! We have pests inside, too.” Yet, just like in the human immune system, issues can arise when a forest ecosystem is exposed to high levels of a new, unfamiliar pathogen or pest. A healthy forest, Mary explains, is the first line of defense against such cases. Fragmented, degraded, or young forests, like many of the ones in Northeast Ohio, are much more vulnerable, and may reach a point where they can no longer respond effectively to the newest health risk. At this point, a forest may begin to show serious symptoms.

In addition, our highly globalized economy, with products and people constantly moving from place to place, means there is a high risk of disease transmission between ecosystems. For example, something as simple as grocery store lilies tossed in the backyard compost pile could unintentionally introduce an unfamiliar pest or pathogen to the local environment.

This is where scientists like Mary come in – and their research plays an essential role in 21st century forest stewardship. Understanding how pests and pathogens move, reproduce, and impact individual trees helps determine what can be done to support forest resiliency.

When asked if her research can get discouraging, Mary says, “It’s like detective work! And it’s our job to do it. So it doesn’t get me down.” She goes on: “The hope is in seeing people [take action] ... And everyone’s doing it in their own way.” She also finds motivation in the things she observes out in the woods. “Even in a centimeter, there is ... a microbiome! I mean, I found a little tardigrade on my beech samples just swimming around, under the microscope.” She continues, “There is so much life that is dependent on a healthy forest, and I find that very exciting ... We are all connected, on a small scale and a large scale.”

How can I help?

- In the woods, think twice before moving anything – just because you don’t see something doesn’t mean it’s not there, and once things travel, they’re difficult to stop!
- Never transport firewood between forests
- Clean your shoes after hiking to avoid spreading pests from one ecosystem to another

Learn more:

Check out Claudia’s favorite field guide for Ohio and the surrounding region – *Mushrooms of the Northeast* by Teresa Marrone & Walt Sturgeon.

Learn more:

Look into the Great Lakes Basin Forest Health Collaborative and apps like TreeSnap, which both rely on citizen science to locate specimens of at-risk tree species for researchers to study.

Katie Stuble

Researcher, question asker, hiker, restoration ecologist & community ecologist | *Lake County*



There are a few different types of medical professionals, Katie Stuble explains — those whose work is confined to a research lab, those who work in patient care, and those who combine the two disciplines with an applied research approach. “I think [conservation professionals] do the exact same thing!” she says. Ecology research has the potential to inform woodland management decisions — or patient care — in very tangible ways, and it is at this intersection where Katie, a restoration and community ecologist at the Holden Arboretum, focuses her work.

Community ecologists, Katie explains, study interactions between species — how they communicate with and influence each other, and how they respond to ecosystem changes as a whole. Restoration ecology, on the other hand, puts humans back in the system and, taking into account current issues and a future full of unknown ones, attempts to determine which practices can be done on the landscape to increase resiliency.

When Katie and her fellow researchers systematically observe and document the ways in which ecosystems respond to different practices, they are able to build a predictive framework of management “prescriptions” that can help landowners and land managers make the best decisions for their goals and their unique forest. In addition, Katie explains, measurable data on the impacts of these practices can lead to the development of science-based policy and increased access to grant money, which helps fund additional management.

Learn more:

Look for Katie and her colleagues’ invasive removal data in the October 2024 issue of *Ecological Solutions and Evidence* (see Jenkins, et al. “Effort required for sustained management ...”)

Joe & Christel Diliberto

Stewards of 40 acres of deciduous mesic forest, passionate about educating Ohio landowners about the dos and don’ts of timber contracts | *Portage County*



Joe and Christel Diliberto never set out to educate others about **forestry** practices, but ever since an experience they shared in 2017, they have become committed to telling their story. They hope that by doing so, they can provide more context about what to avoid when signing a timber contract.

The Dilibertos’ connection with their woodland began over 20 years ago. After raising a family in the suburbs, they decided to look for a spot where they could “roam around a little bit,” in Joe’s words. They soon found a beautiful parcel of land in Portage County to build a home. Joe cut trails through the woods for his grandkids to explore and remembers setting up tents among the trees for campouts. Both he and Christel valued the privacy and quiet they found there, and they enrolled in the **Ohio Forest Tax Law program**, which reduces property taxes for landowners who have a forest **management plan** in place.

In 2017, they needed to hire someone to remove a few trees near the house as a safety measure. This was the second time they had done so, and previously it had been quite expensive, so they decided to try a **logger** who had come by the house a few times over the years to offer his services. He said he would pay the Dilibertos to let him remove trees instead of the other way around, which sounded like a great deal. He

then asked if his team could harvest out of the woods as well, promising to only remove trees with a 24-inch diameter or more. The Dilibertos thought, why not? “He was real nice,” Joe remembers. “I thought he was okay, and I gave him the contract.”

Joe and Christel could not have anticipated what came next. The logging team arrived with huge machinery and a portable sawmill that they drove straight in the woods, damaging everything in their path. “We saw the mess they were making right away,” Joe explains. “I thought I would have a heart attack. It was bad.”

The Dilibertos begged the workers to stop, but nobody listened. Joe tried over and over to contact a **forester** he had worked with in the past, but unbeknownst to him, that forester had retired and no one was taking his calls. Joe called the police, the village hall, and his lawyer, but it was too late to do anything but watch the destruction unfold.

The workers stayed all summer and took everything that could be milled on 40 acres, including the trees the Dilibertos hoped to keep. They left behind enormous slash piles, waist high stumps, a 10-foot-tall mountain of sawdust, treetops everywhere, and soil that supports very little life. When a forest is timbered in this way, it may not recover for a century or more. “There are no words to describe it,” Joe says, shaking his head. “It’s impossible to really enjoy the property anymore ... I wouldn’t want anybody [else] to go through that.”

Christel and Joe’s story doesn’t end there, however. Even though their experiences are painful to recount, they find purpose in sharing them. Exploitative timber practices are increasingly common in Northeast Ohio (see p. 34), and the Dilibertos have partnered with local conservation organizations to help get the word out about what’s at stake. They encourage people to work with a forester when negotiating a timber sale and to consider every angle of a contract. “Live and learn,” Christel says. “If one person makes a different choice because of our story, we’ll get a good deal.”

Learn more:

There are ways to cut timber that support forest health and may allow for multiple harvests in a lifetime (see pp. 23, 26, 27) but always consult a service forester first (see p. 4).

Connect With Community



“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

*— Margaret Mead,
American anthropologist*

Forest stewardship is difficult to do alone – it may require the cooperation of landowners, government officials, neighbors, natural resource professionals, scientists, and more. Read on for stories of groups and individuals who have banded together with members of their community to accomplish their stewardship goals.

The community builders in this section also provide invaluable advice for those of us who don’t have access to large, forested areas. They remind us how meaningful and impactful it can be to steward even the smallest pockets of woodland, and how much we can accomplish when we join forces with our neighbors.

Nick Fletcher

Community advocate, high school Latin teacher, native plant propagator, steward of various urban/suburban sites

Management priorities: riparian buffers, wildlife habitat, native plant regeneration, reforestation | *Cuyahoga County*



Nick is one of those people who has a dozen projects going on at any given time. In recent years, his efforts have centered around wildlife habitat creation, reforestation, and **riparian buffer** management, and have led to projects in his community, workplace, and home. It all began, Nick explains, during COVID, when he decided to teach his high school Latin classes in the woods on campus as opposed to using Zoom.

“Most days I would show up, go out to the woods, get a fire going. And then students would come out to me over the course of the day, and we would have class,” he explains. “Immersing myself in that environment [all day long] got me much more interested in what was going on around me.” It was that same year that Nick stumbled across *The Nature of Oaks* by Douglas Tallamy. “That opened up a whole new world in terms of understanding the connection between native trees, plants, caterpillars, and other life forms in general,” he shares.

The following summer, Nick started helping out in the native garden at his daughter’s elementary school. This led to his involvement with other local conservation efforts in the area, including the city of Shaker Heights’

Stormwater & Green Spaces Subcommittee. The committee had recently piloted a Grow Not Mow campaign with a site that would be converted from mowed lawn to a diverse riparian buffer in order to reduce runoff and provide habitat. The city would eventually join forces with the Doan Brook Watershed Partnership, the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District, and the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes to select and/or steward two more No-Mow sites.

As Nick became more involved with these efforts, he encouraged project leaders to focus on invasive removal in addition to their goal of growing native plants. He and other volunteers now work together to **girdle** or apply **cut stump herbicide treatment** to invasive trees and shrubs like Norway maple, white mulberry, multiflora rose and buckthorn. This makes room for native plants to thrive: herbaceous species like milkweed, swamp marigold, goldenrod, and aster, understory shrubs like paw paw, dogwood, buttonbush, hawthorn, eastern wahoo, and nannyberry, and canopy trees like walnut, oak, sycamore, black cherry, and hickory. Pin oak saplings and wildflowers like ironweed and late boneset have sprung up on their own. “We supplement the saplings and plants with a lot of native grass and tree seed too,” Nick adds. “We’ve even brought tennis rackets to hit walnuts around!”

Once he got involved with the No-Mow sites, Nick started thinking about Hawken, the high school where he works. “Once you start noticing these things, it’s really hard to unsee them,” he laughs. So far, he and a colleague have planted a native garden at one of the three Hawken campuses, led students in removing invasive plants in the woods of another campus, and have repurposed an old greenhouse, where they grow native plants from seed that they collect themselves. They hope to eventually pilot a No-Mow project on campus as well.

When asked what he has learned from working with students, Nick says he often observes a disconnect between global environmental concerns and our own ecosystems. “Young people are really aware of climate change ... but a lot of times they don’t see the connection between worrying about those issues and

thinking about forested spaces,” he explains. “When the topic of sustainability comes up, everybody goes to recycling, to composting, to solar or electric vehicles ... their first instinct is not, ‘Let’s rebuild the urban canopy.’” But the latter, Nick argues, is one of the most impactful causes to be a part of.

“To see the diversity of species that show up when you create habitat, when you make room for them, gives me hope. It’s hard to make that big of an impact in such a short time [anywhere else],” he says.

When asked what other advice he would give to those who are curious about these kinds of projects, Nick is adamant that anyone can get involved. “A lot of people think that [conservation organizations] or park districts have this stuff covered ... they don’t see their own ability to do some of this work and make big changes with fairly simple actions.” He goes on to explain that for him, as a person without a science or **forestry** background, it has been empowering to reach the point he is at today, after just a few years of trial and error. “It’s been cool to go from knowing almost nothing to having real conversations with trained professionals and being able to say, ‘In two years we’ve grow 250 species of seed,’” he shares.

As for the public sphere, Nick continues, “Once you see just how much you can affect by talking to the right people, or being persistent, you realize, ‘Oh, I can engage with elected officials and city employees. I can make a difference by advocating for a different way of doing things, a different way of looking at land.’” In the case of an initiative like Grow Not Mow, it often helps to highlight everything a municipality or business stands to gain. For example, leaving just a few acres of lawn unmown saves time and money, reduces runoff, sequesters carbon, and creates habitat, among other benefits.

Sometimes Nick has faced pushback from municipal or community leaders who are resistant to change, and his conservation work is often physically and mentally exhausting, but he perseveres anyway. “I think a lot of what speaks to me about this sort of work is that it’s not about me. It’s always good to be reminded of why I’m doing this — the life around [us].”

“If you believe in making space for others, I think that doesn’t stop at one species! It has to extend to the littlest things out there.” - Nick Fletcher

Learn more:

Check out Terraformation Academy for free online courses about native seed propagation! In the Cleveland area, join Friends of Lower Lake for weekly invasive removal and native planting projects.



A sign explaining the No Mow project to passersby

How can I help?

- Advocate for native planting projects and/or invasive plant removal at the schools, parks, libraries, and businesses you frequent.
- Have a yard? Plant a native garden! Have an apartment balcony? Grow native plants or shrubs in pots!
- Talk to your neighbors, coworkers, city representatives, and loved ones about why native plants, riparian buffers, and reforestation projects matter.

Colleen Berg

Special Projects Urban Forester; passionate about cultivating healthy urban canopy throughout the region alongside neighborhood residents & diverse community partners
State of Ohio

Colleen's home country of Guyana is one of the most forested in the world, but in the capital city of Georgetown, where she was raised, most of her early interactions with plants happened in the garden with her dad. "I had to help him all the time. It was quite annoying!" she shares with a laugh.

Since then, Colleen has traveled a long and winding path to get to where she is today – a path that includes multiple countries and states, an education in both agricultural and environmental science, and work in fisheries inspection, manufacturing, various natural resource management fields, nature education, and community outreach.

Though she found value in each career change, one passion remained constant throughout. "My heart was always with **forestry**," she shares.

Colleen (bottom left) at a planting project with Heights Tree People



However, pursuing that passion has not always been simple. Colleen explained her experience upon moving to the United States: "Because I worked in forestry in Guyana and in Jamaica, I thought it would be an easy transition. But it wasn't. A lot of the forest here is countryside, and I wasn't comfortable being a new person, out in the woods like that."

To complicate matters further, her forestry credentials weren't recognized by many employers in the US, so she needed to return to school and essentially begin again in a field she already knew so well. This led her to an AmeriCorps position with Cuyahoga Soil and Water Conservation District, where she built connections within the natural resource field in Ohio and led forestry-based programming for local students. A few years later, a colleague from **ODNR** invited her to apply for an **urban forester** position, and that's where Colleen has dedicated her time ever since.

Urban forestry differs from traditional forestry in a few key ways. It focuses on cultivating **urban canopy** in spaces like parks and neighborhoods opposed to stewarding entire woodland ecosystems, and often involves working closely with a variety of community partners. Though it often has less implications for natural resource or large-scale habitat concerns than traditional forestry does, it can have profound impacts in the communities where it is implemented.

Colleen is passionate about extending these impacts to as many Ohio neighborhoods as possible, and has focused much of her efforts on streamlining communication between the many different stakeholders involved.

She explained that municipal and state governments often have regulations on where they can plant trees, which can result in planting projects that only happen on already maintained public lands. However, by forming relationships with local NGOs, Colleen is able to facilitate tree plantings on private land – places

whose inhabitants could easily be left out of city planting projects. Another essential component, she explains, is to connect with neighborhood residents to discuss their concerns and values before determining whether a site is right for a tree planting. It's an opportunity to answer questions and perhaps instill a newfound appreciation for trees in those she speaks with.

"I really think people [in the neighborhood] should have a say," she says. "If we get buy in from the folks that live there, it makes for a better relationship [and helps foster] a basic love for the trees."

This sort of approach, she insists, ensures that neighborhood residents become more invested in the success of a project, and encourages collaboration between tree commissions, city employees, homeowners, local nonprofits, and more. "[This] gets us all together on the same page. That's when, in my mind, you'll be able to establish more canopy. We'd be able to work together as a collective."

How can I get involved in urban forestry?

- Find out if your city has a tree commission & how to help. Are there other organizations that are planting trees, organizing park cleanups, or facilitating invasive removal? Start showing up!
- Look into volunteering with a native plant nursery
- Call your state Division of Forestry to ask about other urban initiatives

"Increased urban canopy has been shown to raise air quality, sequester carbon, reduce flood risk, mitigate extreme heat, and improve physical health and mental wellbeing of nearby residents." - National League of Cities

Learn more:

Check out the Nurturing Urban Tree Seeds (N.U.T.S.) program that Colleen helped develop, and Project Learning Tree, a nationwide initiative that helps teach kids about trees and forests.



Planting with Dayton Job Corps members

Gates Mills Tree Canopy Committee

Village-appointed group dedicated to cultivating resilient forests on a municipal scale

Management priorities: invasive removal, native regeneration, overall forest health public education | *Cuyahoga County*



As a small, tight-knit village in a largely forested corner of Northeast Ohio, Gates Mills is, in many ways, the ideal place to pilot a community-wide woodland restoration effort. The village has a history of prioritizing conservation, beginning in 1988 with the formation of an entirely volunteer-run **land conservancy**. Since 1991, the conservancy has largely been funded by a village conservation levy – an additional tax for residents that helps fund land stewardship efforts.

One of the conservancy's most recent efforts has been the creation of a village Tree Canopy Committee, comprised of village council members and conservancy board members. Nat Smith, a longtime conservancy board member himself, explains, "There was a recognition that our forest isn't as healthy as it used to be [and] we needed to adapt ... [We also wanted] to inspire villagers to take action on their own properties." Thus, the committee was born.

Though none of the members had a strong background in **forestry**, the committee head, Mitch Bass, was in the process of working with a **forester** in his own woods, and the committee determined to follow his lead.

"Over the last year we've been running an experiment," Nat shares. "We picked four [sites] in Gates Mills – one

conservancy and three village properties – and started a pilot project where we remove **invasives** this year and next, with a tree planting phase at the end of the second year." The four properties total 60 acres and are highly visible from the road, and the committee put signage by each site to explain the goal of the project. The committee has hired a local forest management team to advise and carry out the invasive removal and tree planting.

"We're at the early stages of [this work] as an organization," Nat says. "We [want] to educate ourselves about [what works] for village and conservancy properties, and then educate the villagers, too." Nat goes on to explain that part of their long-term goal includes the development of a forestry plan for the entire village – though he admits this would be a major expense for a small municipality. "I think if you're going to be successful, you have to find a way to leverage the available government funding and be very careful in deciding what makes sense to go after and what doesn't," he explains. For the Tree Canopy Committee, this means applying for **NRCS** grants like **EQIP**, inviting private landowners to join their efforts, and prioritizing management of the most impactful sites.

When asked how he would advise other municipalities that hope to accomplish similar goals, Nat suggests speaking with other community members to gauge interest in a conservation fund or levy. If there is interest, the idea can be pitched to city or village leaders. Then, it's important to establish an organization like a land conservancy that can manage the funds. "I think it would be hard for the Gates Mills Village Council to also act as a conservancy," Nat explains. "It's a lot of work, and it needs continuity." And when that effort and continuity is focused on a common goal, even a community the size of Gates Mills (population: 2,203) can make a substantial impact. Nat says, "Since 1988, Gates Mills has protected about 725 acres, which is not insignificant!" Agreed, Nat – in Northeast Ohio, every acre counts.

Learn more:
Visit the ODNR website, or contact your state service forester, to learn about available cost-share funding through forest landowner assistance programs like EQIP.

Cuyahoga Indigenous Tribal Council

Community organization dedicated to the preservation of Indigenous heritage and restoration of ancestral lands

Management priorities: wildlife habitat, beauty, trail building, space for cultural gatherings
Cuyahoga County

The Cuyahoga Indigenous Tribal Council (CITC) was established in 2020 to create unity and strengthen cultural ties among Indigenous communities in the Cleveland area. They host pottery workshops, Cherokee language classes, and community events, and steward several parcels of land in East Cleveland. Herman Gilbert, one of the leaders of CITC whose family moved to Cleveland when he was young, shared why forest stewardship is one of the council's priorities.

Several years ago, it began to bother Herman that the Native community of Northeast Ohio needed to rent space to host powwows or other cultural celebrations, and he decided to do something about it. "That was the genesis for me to buy land," Herman explains. Eventually, he purchased a small plot of young forest in the middle of East Cleveland, surrounded by city-owned property, and with the help of the CITC, Gadugi Park was born. *Gadugi* is a Cherokee word meaning collective or communal effort, and it describes what the council hopes to build: a haven for wildlife and humans alike, where they can gather with friends and family for ceremonial events.

That's not all, however. Herman says, "When the city doesn't have the resources to take care of [the properties around Gadugi Park] like they normally would, we like to care for them, too." For now, this mostly means trail restoration and trash cleanup – some of the properties are popular dump sites for old tires and other trash – across several connecting parcels. All the work is done by volunteers who find meaning in the mission of the project.

One of Herman's favorite parts of his stewardship work is the chance to observe the deer, woodpeckers, coyotes, and other wildlife who take refuge in the area. It's satisfying to know that he and the other members

of CITC can help protect their habitat. "The thing is," he explains, "We can't own land. We're just the guardians of the land. And our job is to create a safe place for these animals."

Additionally, he adds, they would like to work towards food sovereignty in the future. They hope to eventually cultivate much of their own produce and resources themselves.

It's a lot of work, but Herman is unfazed about what is to come or how long it might take. "You don't grow any further than your reach, you know? I don't care how slow we have to grow. It's what we do."

Ajha Dean-Phillips, a member of the CITC, helps with trail work



Learn more:
Check out cuyahogaindigenous.org to stay in the loop about upcoming events, offerings, and projects.

Cultivate Resilient Working Lands



“When you find a farmer or a forester who has united the inescapable economic concern with an equally compelling interest in ecology, that is when you had better stop and take notice.”

- Wendell Berry, American writer and farmer

The following landowners and professionals have built their lives around forests. They rely on them for food, income, timber, and nourishment – what Wendell Berry might call “the inescapable economic concern.” They are thoughtful and intentional stewards of the lands they work on, because they know better than anyone that if you care for the forest, the forest cares for you.

Jessica Miller Mecaskey

Forester, ecologist, forager, book-lover, previous steward of a 67-acre public demonstration forest, lifelong apprentice of trees | *Lake County*



Jessica in her current role as consulting forester, with colleague Patrick O'Reilly

Jessica's love of forests began in her childhood. She spent many formative hours exploring the woods of Northeast Ohio with her family – yet after taking a plant biology class in college, she suddenly saw them with new eyes. “It was like I had all these friends, this close relationship with all these trees and places, and all of a sudden, I had names for them,” she explains. “It was like something got unlocked.” She determined to pursue a career related to the natural world.

After college, she worked a variety of conservation-related jobs and found that she was most interested in exploring management on a landscape scale. She eventually connected with staff at the Holden Arboretum, who were developing a way to assess forest health and ultimately prescribe specific management actions. It seemed like the perfect fit.

“In Ohio, we’re blessed with this rich and wonderful, and yes, renewable, resource! And the process of managing it for timber products can actually tie us more meaningfully to the land.”

- Jessica Miller Mecaskey

At Holden, Jessica's understanding of stewardship deepened. She recalls that after an entire summer assessing various forests, thinking about what made them healthy or unhealthy, she walked into a young post-agricultural stand and immediately felt that something was wrong. She remembers thinking, “What’s going on? There are too many trees of a certain size. None of them are very big. They just don’t seem to be reaching their potential.” There wasn’t much wildlife activity, either. “It [was] a different kind of silence,” Jessica explains.

When her colleague pointed out old farming furrows in the soil from past agriculture, something clicked. “I was like, okay, something happened a very, very long time ago and it’s impacting the landscape now,” she says. If that was true, she realized, there were actions that could be taken in the current season that could impact the trajectory of the woods a hundred years into the future, for better or for worse.

“As a child, I was very suspicious of any [human-caused] changes to a place I love, which made sense. So much of human activity is destructive.” Jessica shares. “But now [I understand] that change is the rule – not the exception – when it comes to ecosystems. And humans are part of this ecosystem.” The question then becomes, What sort of change will we choose to initiate?

Considering forest management in this way also gave Jessica the opportunity to think critically about products that come out of the woods, specifically timber. She describes the first active harvest that she observed: “They were skidding logs, old trees were coming down, it was messy, there were treetops everywhere ... It was pretty disturbing to me.”

Afterwards, she discussed the harvest with a colleague whose opinion she greatly respected, and he called it an example of responsible resource use – a way for the landowner to earn a bit of income without depleting the forest. Timber harvests, she learned, could even increase long-term forest health if done intentionally. “We [also] talked about all the wood products in our lives [and I realized] that if you say you’re an

environmentalist but aren’t willing to think critically about those products, there’s some hypocrisy there,” she explains. “It was a pivotal moment for me.”

What if someone has concerns about using wood products at all? “Everyone is entitled to their values and how they want to live those out,” Jessica begins. “But so often, solutions that are marketed as sustainable simply have less visible impacts.” For example, products like bamboo are praised for their low carbon footprint and quick turnaround, but their production has its own cost, often borne by countries outside of North America.

If a person values local economies in addition to local ecosystems, wood products made from nearby forests may be a wise choice. In addition, Jessica says, “If we are harvesting sustainably from our forests, we will be more motivated to keep [them forested]. When something is converted to a developed area, that’s usually the last thing it will ever be. [To prevent] that is huge.”

It was this ethos – an awareness of the many nuances surrounding timber, forest products, and active management – that guided Jessica on the next step of her career: helping create a 67-acre public demonstration site, the Working Woods Learning Forest.

The project, which is still ongoing, involves the application of different management strategies in each area of the forest – including **invasive** removal, canopy thinning, and a selective timber harvest. Each strategy was implemented with the ultimate goal of increasing forest resiliency and biodiversity, and the results are regularly monitored by Holden scientists. Landowners, natural resource professionals, and the general public are invited to tour the site, and in so doing, Jessica and her colleagues hope to inspire more active stewardship in the region – both for the good of people and woods.

When asked why this matters, Jessica reflects: “A working woods reminds us that ... there are good things that can come from intentional work with and on a woodland.” She continues, “That’s different from [what] I was taught about conservation at a young age. [But] after seeing it firsthand, I really do believe it. It’s not our absence that brings forest health, it’s our presence.” However, Jessica says, if a forest is

managed for products like timber, maple syrup, edible mushrooms, or medicinal plants, it’s essential to remember that this represents just one part of the story.

“[If we] simplify woods to their monetary value, we can lose touch with [all the other] pieces that are worth noticing,” she explains. There is so much we do not yet understand about forests, but we do know they are full of life, and for Jessica, that gives them inherent value.

“I come back to the word reverence,” she explains. “We don’t often connect to this idea, but the reality is that things die for other things to live. I think a lot of suffering has come about from our own disregard for the sacrifices that happen for us to [survive].” Becoming more intimately involved with those sources of life is a way to rewrite that story, Jessica believes. “The reality of what’s being sacrificed [becomes] more real. And then oftentimes the gratitude and care for that which supports life – our natural environment – goes deeper. Those logs on a truck become less of a resource, more of a gift.”

Jessica in Working Woods, excited about native seedlings regenerating in the light gap created by a timber harvest



“In a working woods, things that are good for the woods are constantly going in [while] things that are good for people are coming out. It reminds us that we’re not separate from our environments.”

- Jessica Miller Mecaskey

Learn more about the Working Woods Learning Forest at the Holden Arboretum by visiting holdenfg.org/community-forestry/working-woods/

Bill & Dee Belew

Maple syrup producers, blueberry farmers, people lovers, stewards of a 200-year-old 40-acre sugarbush

Management priorities: sap production, overall forest health and resilience, invasive removal, legacy | *Geauga County*



“To me, Geauga is the most beautiful county in the whole state,” says Dee Belew. “Especially with the change of seasons.” She and her husband Bill moved there in 1969, settling down on a parcel of land down the road from Lewis and Helen Messenger, who would soon come to feel like family. When the Belews decided to purchase a farm of their own, they brought Lewis and Helen out to see it. “We had money down on this place [in Middlefield],” says Bill. Lewis was in his 80s, and he said, “Well, what about our farm?”

Bill and Dee loved the idea. The Belews rescinded their first offer and moved onto the Messenger property in 1992. The land had been in the Messenger family for four generations, and included a **sugarbush** that had been tapped from the early 1800s until the 1970s. Bill, who has long had a passion for maple syrup, was especially eager to revive the practice and quit his job to do so full-time. “I first made maple syrup when I was about nine,” he shares. “My mom would tap a few trees. It was probably the worst syrup in the world, but I had the itch. It got in my blood.”

“If you take care of the trees, they take care of you.” - Lewis Messenger

Learn more:

Visit the Belews at Messenger Century Farm in Auburn Township for blueberries and sunflowers in July, maple events in early spring, and a country porch store year-round.

Mark Hochstetler

Third generation furniture maker, family business owner, community forestry educator, steward of four tree farms totaling 2000 acres

Management priorities: timber, overall forest health, hunting | *Holmes County*

Mark Hochstetler was five years old when his grandfather moved in next door. “My brothers were in school, so I had [him] all to myself,” Mark smiles. “I would sit at the workbench while he built furniture. It was a friendship that lasted the rest of his lifetime.”

In those early days, Mark’s grandfather specialized in small wooden parts for agricultural equipment, and later, architectural millwork like wooden doors and paneling. Ultimately the family shifted their focus to wooden chairs – first for the residential market, then the commercial market as well. Mark joined the company when he was twenty years old, and today, he and his four brothers run it together.

However, the family wasn’t involved in forest management until 1994, when Mark’s brother saw an advertisement warning that the world would run out of trees by 2020. “We knew it wasn’t true,” Mark explains. “[But] as a consumer of timber products, we were in no position to say otherwise. It was our word against somebody else’s. He went on, “Then we remembered, it’s better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.” They decided then and there to plant their own trees. They purchased 200 acres of land, 120 of which were already forested, and got to work.

“All of the timberland had been mismanaged [by] removing the best trees and leaving the worst,” Mark shares. In addition, he says, about half of forest was reverted farmland, which had resulted in tightly packed, **even-aged stands** and a lot of **invasive** shrubs in the understory. He and his family were determined to do things differently, however, so they called the state service forester assigned to their county and sought advice.

The Hochstetlers also started attending forestry workshops and field days, trying to learn all they could and apply it to their forest. “We did a lot of work on our **tree farm**. For years, it seemed like all we were doing was cutting invasives. But all at once, we realized that we were ready to cut timber,” Mark says of their journey.

These days, they manage 2000 acres and are able to grow a significant portion of their own lumber for their

furniture operations, which has been a very rewarding process for the family. “We are always planting more,” Mark says. “Thousands of seedlings a year.”

Furthermore, he and his family are part of a tight-knit Amish community in their area, and they often receive calls from neighbors who are wary of English foresters and want the Hochstetlers to walk their woods first. Mark always agrees. He explains that it’s an opportunity to give his neighbors some informal advice about what the woods need, and to encourage them to create their own **management plans** with the help of a **forester** – who, he assures them, can be trusted to represent their interests. This is usually enough assurance for the neighbor to make the call, Mark says, and he hopes that these types of actions will help create a more widespread culture of forest stewardship in his community.

When asked what inspires him to do what he does, Mark answers simply: “I believe that it is a God-given responsibility to take care of the ecosystem. Do not deliberately destroy it. I know the human race has done a lot of damage in various ways, but I’m always amazed at how we can mend things.” And for Mark’s family, that looks like growing at least as many trees as they harvest.

Mark’s brothers and grandfather planting an early round of trees



Learn more:

Find the Hochstetlers’ handiwork listed under HW Chair through the Ohio Furniture Guild.

Chad Knisely

Forest management professional, woodworker, turkey hunter, maple syrup producer; passionate about supporting and protecting old growth forest systems and local economies of Northeast Ohio. | *Lake County*



Chad Knisely(left) and Nathan Paskey at Ashcroft Woods

“I’ve always understood that when you’re connected to a resource, you have a responsibility to keep an eye on things,” Chad Knisely says, recalling how upset he felt as a kid when he learned there were zebra mussels in Lake Erie.

It was this sort of sensibility and love for aquatic ecosystems that inspired him to pursue a career in conservation. After some time working as a land protection coordinator for a **land conservancy**, he had an experience that helped narrow his focus. “I visited a property to help create a farmland **conservation easement**. There was a big forested area at the back. The landowner pointed to it and said, ‘That’s where the big woods are. That’s what we really need to protect,’” Chad shares. “He took me back there, and my god, I had never seen anything like it. The sheer size and mass of the oak in there! That was the moment it began for me.”

Chad learned that the area was slated to be cut through property inheritance, and he sprang into

action, ultimately securing over a million dollars over a three-year period through the **Clean Ohio Fund**. This was used to purchase the property and ultimately designate it as a permanent conservation easement.

In the following years, Chad was instrumental in the protection of many more mature and old-growth forests in the region – including Ashcroft Woods Conservation Area. Ashcroft began as a 379-acre plot in the Grand River Lowlands which contained invaluable habitat and aquatic resources. When it came up for sale, Chad and a friend at the Ashtabula Soil and Water Conservation District, Nathan Paskey, helped negotiate a purchase agreement.

Together with a network of conservation partners around the region, they were able to raise the necessary funds to protect the initial 379 acres, and eventually, several surrounding parcels. The entire conservation area now totals approximately 1,000 contiguous acres of wetland, swamp forest, **vernal pools**, and mature forest, and is surely one of the region’s greatest conservation triumphs in recent history.

Later, as the Natural Areas Manager at the Holden Arboretum, Chad led the development of a forest health assessment that could be used across Northeast Ohio to determine what management actions, if any, should be taken in a woodland. He and his team have used it to prescribe things like **invasive treatment**, which allows native saplings to regenerate in the understory, and **girdling** or felling of unhealthy trees, which can create **light gaps**, **woody debris** and/or **snags** – all elements of a healthy forest system.

“It has been a wildly successful program,” Chad says. “We’re just approaching the time to really see if [the prescribed management] is working.” When asked if results are looking positive so far, Chad is confident. “Yes! I can just feel that these forests are better than when we started.”

It isn’t just a desire to preserve beautiful places that drives Chad’s work, however. His connection to



Working Woods, one of the arboretum properties Chad helps steward

forests is extremely personal, and it started when he began hunting turkeys in college. “Hunting gave me a different means to appreciate natural areas,” he explains. “As a hunter, you have to be still and quiet. You absorb so much more.” He also finds meaning in consuming the game he brings home. “When you put the knife to a bird or a deer, you say to yourself, the time and energy was worth it. You get to eat something wild, something strong. Now it has become a part of you. There’s something very special about that.”

Chad also taps maple trees, heats his home with firewood, and is a skilled carpenter and woodworker. But because he doesn’t own forested land, he has partnered with landowners across the area who have invited him to hunt, tap, and cut wood on their properties instead. When asked what advice he would give to other non-forest landowners who want to form a more personal connection with forests, Chad suggests walking through the woods with someone who can explain the processes and species, and what each tree can be used for. Then, if they have interest in hunting or tapping, they can start asking around for opportunities. “Everybody knows someone else, or has a friend of a friend. Just be extremely respectful of

“As a hunter, if you can really settle, you’re able to stop thinking about all the pressures of life and just be. Your senses become much more escalated, and you become so much more focused. You’re able to absorb all the sounds around you. You’d be surprised at how loud the forest is.”
- Chad Knisely

Learn more:
If you are a hunter without access to land, or a forest owner who doesn’t hunt, consider looking into the Ohio Landowner/Hunter Access Partnership Program at ohiodnr.gov

private land, and be genuine and truthful – otherwise people will see right through you,” he advises. And of course, be sure to use the resource conservatively and with respect.

Overall, Chad shares, he hopes that we can all start thinking about forests as something to steward, not extract, and that we will begin to recognize how intimately connected we are to the woods. “There’s a lot of people in my field who I wonder why they’re doing it. They don’t seem to have any personal connection to the landscape. But for me, I do it because it’s a part of me.” He goes on, “Everything I do is connected to the forest. I don’t feel like I could be who I am without it. I care for the forest because the forest cares for me.”

What do you wish people understood about forests?

“Everybody is connected to forests whether they realize it or not. The US sends logs overseas to be made into furniture and sold back to us. The building materials in your house probably came from a forest somewhere, too. It’s funny to me, people will get upset when the trees come down on a neighboring property and then turn around and have oak floors installed in their home.

I think this is the downfall of many places: there’s no sense of reliance upon one’s own self, community, and local resources. It’s only in the last several generations that we’ve even had the ability to become less connected to the forests in our area. They can provide everything we need to survive, and it’s a perfectly natural thing to manage them. People have been doing it as long as people have been around.”

Build & Protect Healthy Ecosystems



"All flourishing is mutual. Soil, fungus, tree, squirrel, [human] – all are the beneficiaries of reciprocity." – Robin Wall Kimmerer, Potawatomi writer and ecologist

Though the following land stewards come from a variety of backgrounds and vary in their approach to management, they all share a determination to keep their forest a forest. Their stories are evidence of the power that we each hold – to not only protect woodlands from development, but also to cultivate spaces for wildlife within them. Each individual in this section has dedicated time and energy to supporting the forest as a whole, and in the process, they have experienced nourishment and meaning for themselves as well.

Mark & Awnhee Hoberecht

Dreamers, travelers, dog lovers, amateur naturalists, stewards of 43 acres of mixed mesophytic forest

Management priorities: wildlife habitat, invasive removal, legacy, overall forest health and resilience | *Lorain County*



When Mark first made a down payment for twenty acres of woodland in 1982, he didn't have concrete management goals in mind.

"I just knew – hey, I love this place," he explained. "I always wanted to protect it so that it would never be developed." As the years went on, Mark and Awnhee met and married and began to build a life together on that 20-acre plot, occasionally purchasing connecting

parcels of woodland when they went up for sale. Today, the forest they steward adds up to 43 1/4 acres ("Gotta get that quarter!" Awnhee laughs).

Though the Hoberechts always planned to conserve their woods, it was only in recent years that they began to dream big about the possibilities. Their first step was to place their forest in a **conservation easement**. At first, the concept felt a bit foreign, but after a few years of seriously considering the idea, they were both on board. In December of 2021, they worked with a local **land conservancy** to ensure that their woodland would never be developed or subdivided, regardless of future owners.

Since then, active stewardship has become a way of life for both Mark and Awnhee. Their goal is to build a nature preserve that can be enjoyed by humans and other creatures alike, complete with trail signage and diverse habitat for everything from songbirds to salamanders.

However, up until two years ago, some sections of the woods were so overrun with poison ivy and **invasive** shrubs that they were near-impossible to navigate, and Mark and Awnhee rarely made the attempt. But after they got serious about active management, they decided it was time to blaze a path right through one of those areas, connecting it to their already existing trail system.

"It shifted something for me," Awnhee explains. "I never thought it was possible, and then all of a sudden it was, you know? ... And now these other projects that [seemed] insane to me, now it's like, sure! Why not?"

And what insane projects are in the works, you might ask? Large scale invasive removal, of course, but also the construction of a deer fence around the property, which would relieve **deer pressure** on the understory and allow populations of native shrubs, wildflowers, and young trees to rebound. Additionally,

the Hoberechts hope to build a chimney swift tower to support native bird populations, and dig several **vernal pools**, which would provide essential habitat for many amphibian and invertebrate species.

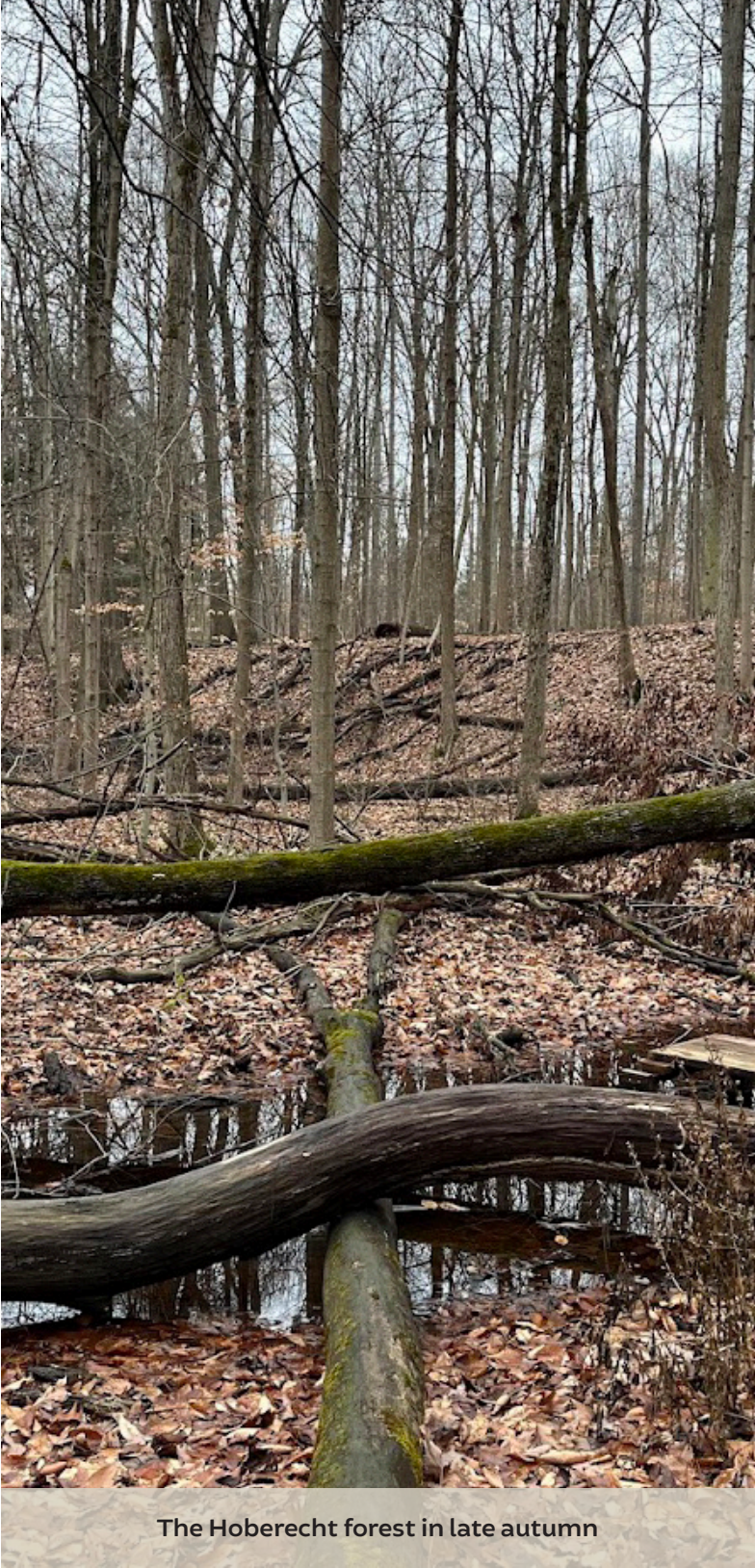
All these projects mean that nowadays, Mark and Awnhee can often be found spending hours on end in the woods. There is so much to do that they regularly hold a "board meeting" at breakfast to discuss the day's activities.

"I used to always hear people say, 'Go out and connect with nature, it'll help ground you.' And I understood that intellectually, but it took me a long time to feel it here," Awnhee shares, tapping her heart.

When asked about the end goal for their woods, Mark shares that they hope to steward it towards an old growth forest system. They aren't sure how it will unfold – there are questions of funding and ability, and they feel exhausted at times – but they have no plans of slowing down. Awnhee adds, smiling, "We're pouring everything into it, and if it ends tomorrow, it was a good ride. We tried, you know?"

Lessons Learned:

- Figure out your goals, and then be realistic about the time, money, and resources you can give
- Recognize that you can't do this on your own
- Take the time to build a team of knowledgeable people who can help you – friends, neighbors, natural resource professionals, etc.



The Hoberecht forest in late autumn

"We don't have kids, so this land is our legacy. This is everything." - Awnhee Hoberecht

Learn more:

Curious about conserving your land? Connect with a local land conservancy to discuss options. Visit LandTrustAlliance.org to find a conservancy near you.

Brad Wynveen

Birdwatcher, hunter, grandfather, steward of 27 acres of hemlock hardwood forest

Management priorities: Grapevine control, wildlife habitat, beauty, privacy | *Geauga County*

Ever since he moved into his current home, surrounded by mossy sandstone and flanked by tall, spindly hemlocks, Brad's camera roll has transformed into a gallery of nature photography. He often spots wild turkeys, large snakes, pileated woodpeckers, amphibians, and the occasional pawprint or scat from a coyote or fox. It's one of his favorite parts about where he lives. "I am one happy camper in the woods," he asserts. "I would not want to live anywhere else."

The woods around Brad's home had been placed in a **conservation easement** before he purchased the property, meaning there are certain things, like grapevine, that he has agreed to maintain. Because his forest is mainly comprised of hemlock, it is also quite vulnerable to the spread of hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA), an **invasive** pest that attacks hemlock needles. Brad's trees are currently being monitored in an attempt to better understand HWA, and he hopes that the pest won't impact the health of his woods too severely. If trees do need to come down, however, Brad

has a strategy. "When I cut trees, I don't cut them to the ground. I usually cut them with a cherry picker. [Then] they're nature poles!"

"Nature poles," or **snags**, attract wildlife, which Brad often observes through his window. He explains, "You have to be here on a daily basis to notice the patterns and correlations. You just see amazing stuff."

For Brad, this love of wildlife runs deep – from beloved summer hunting trips in Wisconsin to forest walks with his young son years later – but after an illness resulted in the loss of both legs, Brad's relationship to the woods shifted. The prosthetic legs he uses aren't designed for uneven surfaces like woodland trails, so when he came across a secondhand Trackchair (an all-terrain wheelchair), he made the investment. "It was a really big moment," he shares. "I got the woods back."

These days, Brad can't wait to share the woods with his grandkids, who are almost old enough to start exploring. He hopes to build more trails through his property that they can experience together. And while getting outside still takes more effort than it used to, for Brad, "There is no reason not to! Fresh air is great for you! The size of the trees, the amount of wildlife, the noises you hear ... it [still] gives me the same feeling of wow, I am just a tiny piece of nature."

How can I help?

- Need to remove a tree? Leave behind a standing snag to provide wildlife habitat!
- Visit the Ohio Dept. of Agriculture (ODA) website to familiarize yourself with the signs of HWA
- If you spot a hemlock with symptoms of HWA, take a photo, note your location, and report it to the ODA at (614) 728 6400

The hemlock hardwood forest near Brad's home



Learn more:

Interested in a Trackchair or other mobility aid? To cut costs, Brad suggests looking into secondhand options, short-term rentals, and grant funding (e.g., Mobility Trust, Chive Charities, or the Triumph Foundation).

Jeannie Yount

Ohio native and steward of a second-generation family forest, comprised of 180 acres of deciduous woods and wetland

Management priorities: legacy, recreation, beauty | *Portage County*

Jeannie was in her 20s the first time she saw a timber harvest gone wrong – and it happened in her own backyard. "It was a disaster ... it looked like a bomb went off," she recalls. So, 25 years later, when she heard that her parents, by then in their late 80s, had signed another contract with a **timber buyer**, she was concerned – both for the woods and for her family's financial wellbeing. The property has been in the family since 1941, and Jeannie felt sick at the thought of another bad harvest.

"I went over and sure enough, they had a contract for only \$40,000 [to clear cut] 80 acres of the property," Jeannie, who lives next door, explains. "My husband said, 'Do you realize \$40,000 isn't much these days? You can't even buy a new pickup truck for that.' The look on my dad's face was total shock." Later, a consultant came by the property and confirmed Jeannie's suspicion that the contract was exploitative – the actual timber value was well over \$100,000, and furthermore, many of the trees were nowhere near ready to be cut.

Jeannie knew she had to do something, so she reached out to a friend who works in conservation, Lynn Vogel. They learned that the timber buyer had pretended to know friends of the family – including Lynn! – in order to seem trustworthy to Jeannie's parents. In addition, he seemed to have a history of embezzlement, as well as addresses and names in multiple states. "He was really shady," Jeannie says, shaking her head.

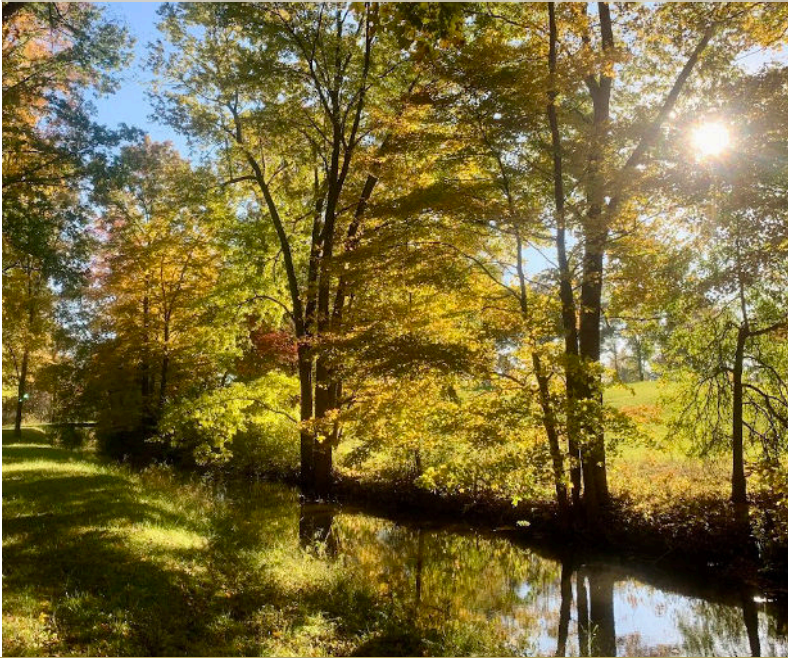
Jeannie and Lynn worked together to hire an attorney, who found a discrepancy in the contract. This provided enough legal ground to dispute it, so they joined representatives from local government agencies in writing letters to the timber buyer, informing him that to proceed would be illegal, and assuring him that they would make the harvest extremely difficult if he attempted it.

Even so, he continued to contact Jeannie, trying to move forward. Lynn shared, "We were fearful to the very day of expiration [over a year later] that they would show up." But thankfully, the combined efforts of Jeannie and her community were successful, and the contract eventually expired. Today, Jeannie and her family can enjoy the woods like they always have.

When asked what advice she would give to landowners, Jeannie encourages them to contact a **forester** before signing a timber contract. "I know it [can] cost money to have somebody look over your contract but it's well worth it. [A bad harvest] can cause so much heartache," she says.

And if someone has already signed a bad contract? Jeannie suggests finding an attorney. There's a chance that, just like in her case, they could help. Jeannie concludes, "That's why whenever people ask, I talk about it, because if we can [impact] just one person, it's worth it."

Jeannie's family forest today



Learn more:

When considering a timber sale, always consult a forester. Find the service forester assigned to you by searching "Ohio DNR State Service Forester Directory" online, or call their office at (877) 247-8733.

Nancy Logan & Joan Steidl

Community educators, readers, animal lovers, stewards of 107 acres of deciduous forest, wetlands and meadow

Management priorities: wildlife habitat, native plant regeneration, recreation, long-term conservation | *Ashtabula County*



From the time she was a kid, Nancy hoped to own a plot of land. “My lifelong dream was to have a horse farm,” she shares. As for her partner, Joan: “Ever since I was young, I wanted to buy land all across the United States, just to save it!”

As adults, it took eight years of searching before their shared dream of land ownership became a reality (though in a slightly different form than they imagined as kids). In 1996, Joan and Nancy moved onto 140 acres of woods, wetland, and farmland in Ashtabula County. Right away, they started exploring and building trails. Nancy learned about the importance of grapevine

control, so with the advice of a **service forester** and the help of a grant, they began removing it. They also allowed a handful of neighbors and friends to hunt on the property.

“We never ever did anything else [for almost 20 years],” Joan says. “But I was always looking around, thinking, how can we preserve this? There’s got to be a way.”

Eventually, Joan and Nancy learned about farmland **conservation easements** from a friend at a **land conservancy**. Here was a solution that fulfilled their goal of preventing future development on their land, but both women had some misgivings about whether or not it was the right choice for them, especially Nancy. However, they weren’t aware of any other options for protecting their land long-term, so they decided to move forward.

Placing one’s land in an easement can be an extensive process, and in this case, it involved a wide range of professionals. Over the course of a year or so, representatives from **NRCS** and the land conservancy came by, as well as a **consulting forester**, a state service forester, and a private lands biologist. Joan and Nancy’s friend from the land conservancy even convinced the Ohio Division of Wildlife to come out and restore a beaver dam. But it wasn’t until a naturalist from the Cleveland Museum of Natural History paid them a visit that they realized how special their land was. “You guys don’t know what you have here,” she explained. “People would drive all over the state just to stand here and see the birds.”

“That’s when we realized what a treasure we had,” Joan says – and Nancy agrees. Around the same time, Joan

realized that because trees are an agricultural product, a future landowner could clear cut them without violating the terms of the easement that they were considering. This didn’t sit right with her, and she began to feel as uneasy as Nancy did.

Then an NRCS representative mentioned a federally funded wetland preservation program, which immediately felt like a better fit. Joan and Nancy canceled their previous agreement and switched gears to focus on their passion: creating and preserving wildlife habitat.

Over the next few years, they worked closely with trusted professionals to secure **EQIP** funding, which they used to create a pollinator field, a soft mast (native fruit and berry) planting, and a five-acre plot of young, or “early successional,” forest. They also hired a forester, Mark Wilthew, to put together a comprehensive forest **management plan**. In the past, Joan and Nancy had sometimes felt like **forestry** professionals who visited their land just didn’t get it. This one was different. Nancy explains: “He was remarkable. He heard us.” Joan adds, “We loved him. He understood what we were doing and what we needed.”

With their management plan in hand, Joan and Nancy could confidently move forward with the wetland preservation program. They were awarded federal grant funding to preserve 107 acres in perpetuity. Once the easement was in place, the grant funded the supplies and labor needed to complete the project, which included the planting of 18,000 trees and shrubs and the creation of various **vernal pools** and ponds across the property. “We planted [20 more acres] of baby forest, so we can now say we have 100 acres of forest!” Nancy exclaims. She and Joan hope to see their land return to a diverse **mesic** woodland like the one that existed there 200 years ago.

These days, Joan and Nancy’s property is bursting with wildlife, from insects and songbirds to waterfowl and amphibians. When they think back on where they were just a few years ago, they are amazed at how much their perspectives have changed. Joan recalls experiencing a paradigm shift when speaking to the private lands biologist who visited their property years ago. He said, “You guys have done a good job of saving the land. Now you’re going to start conserving it.” Joan explains, “I’m realizing that you have to work the land to save it. Before, we were just letting nature run its course, and that’s okay. But this is more intentional, and I think it’s going to do more good.”

Joan & Nancy’s Lessons Learned:

- We came here knowing nothing and learned a lot of wisdom from reading. Books are powerful!
- Search your heart and figure out why you’re doing this – this will help guide your management decisions. Then, don’t let anyone back you into a corner. If it takes you five years to make up your mind, it takes you five years!
- Before purchasing land, work with your county auditor and recorder’s office to **make sure it has a clean title** – meaning the property is free from any liens or ownership disputes. This includes things like old oil and gas leases, which often go unmentioned when properties change hands and can prevent you from placing an easement on your land

“I can’t save the manatees! But there are days I come back here and it’s so gorgeous I almost get weepy. That makes it worth it. I really believe that we can all do something in our corner of the world.” – Nancy Logan

Learn more:

Visit the ODNR website, or contact your state service forester, to learn about forest landowner assistance programs like EQIP or WREP (Wetland Reserve Enhancement Partnership).

“We had so many people come out to our land. Every time they talked, we were listening and learning.” – Joan Steidl

Your Forest Journey Starts Here



Take a moment to look around. Chances are you are surrounded by gifts of the forest – perhaps in the chair you’re sitting in, the paper in your hands, the breath in your lungs, the medicine you take, the maple syrup in your fridge, or the birdsong outside your window. And just like the land stewards in these pages demonstrate, there are countless ways to give back! It all starts with small steps—and there is a supportive community of neighbors and friends to help you along the way.

Ready to begin? Here are a few places to start:

For Anyone

- **Go for a walk in the woods.** Grab an ID guide or app, pick a single forest trail or loop, and learn every tree along it. Then, learn the understory plants and fungi.
- **Read literature that inspires active reciprocity with forests and land.** Try Robin Wall Kimmerer, Ethan Tapper, Roger Deakin, Doug Tallamy, Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry, Barbara Kingsolver, Camille Dungy, Ross Gay, and/or Aimee Nezhukumatathil.
- **Attend forest-related workshops, webinars, and classes.** Join the mailing list for park/soil and water districts, land conservancies, public gardens, state divisions of forestry, landowner groups, watershed groups, and university extensions .
- **Help out with urban canopy restoration.** Find out if your city has a tree commission and how you can help, or ask any of the above organizations how you can volunteer.
- **Grow native plants.** A window box or balcony planter count!
- **Get connected with “goods from the woods.”** Take a woodworking class, learn about mushroom logs, try tapping the sugar maple in your yard, or purchase responsibly harvested timber products from local forests.
- **Learn about the history of forests and forest management in your area.** Local natural history museums, universities, historical societies, departments of natural resources, and even old satellite imagery may be able to help.

For Forest Landowners

- **Examine your current relationship with your woods.** What do you love about them? What activities do you use them for? Do you have any concerns or specific goals for the future?
- **Determine & mark your property boundaries.** You can do this yourself by consulting your county auditor’s website and/or online satellite imagery, or hire a land surveyor or forester.
- **Get to know what’s in your woods.** Can you identify native and invasive plants? Does your forest seem mature, middle aged, or young? How diverse is it? Are there any signs of past land use, like old farming furrows?
- **Connect with a forester or other trusted resource.** It’s always a good idea to consult with someone who is trained in forest health, especially when considering active management.
- **Consider developing a management plan.** This can be something you return to for years as you continue to make decisions about your woodland.
- **Talk to your neighbors.** Nearby forest owners can provide helpful advice, and partnering with them can increase the impact of any active stewardship you enact on your own land.

GLOSSARY

Arborist: See p. 4

Clean Ohio Fund: State initiative that seeks to fund outdoor recreation projects for governmental and non-profit organizations.

Conservation easement: A voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and a governmental or non-profit agency like a land conservancy that regulates what can and cannot be done on a property, even if ownership changes hands. Customizable to needs and goals of the landowner.

Cut stump herbicide treatment: A common strategy to remove high numbers of invasive woody plants with minimal damage to surrounding species. Involves trimming the shrub/tree close to the ground, then painting or stamping the stump with concentrated herbicide.

Deer pressure: Describes the impact of deer on an ecosystem. In a forest, high numbers of deer can result in a missing understory up to 4–5 feet (the “browse line”) which stifles regeneration.

EQIP: Environmental Quality Incentives Program, federally administered through NRCS. Can provide forest landowners with cost-share funding.

Even-aged stand: Forestry term for a section of woodland where all the trees are roughly the same age.

Forester (consulting, service, urban): See p. 4

Forestry: See p. 4

Forestry, urban: See p. 17

Girdle: A method of killing trees slowly, over 1–2 years, by cutting horizontally through the living bark in a ring around the trunk. Often a quicker, safer method than felling; can also be used to maximize wildlife habitat.

Invasive: Describes highly adaptable or “weedy” organisms that can outcompete other species in their ecological niche. Both native and non-native species may exhibit invasive tendencies (i.e., native grapevine and non-native buckthorn).

Land conservancy: A community-based non-profit that works to permanently conserve land, often through easements and/or land acquisition.

Light gap: A break in the canopy of a forest that allows sunlight to reach young plants in the understory; an important feature of healthy forests.

Logger: See p. 4

Management plan: A personalized document that outlines a long-term prescription (10+ years) of specific forest management actions to help achieve specific goals and/or qualify for cost-share or tax programs.

Mesic: Moderately and/or seasonally damp.

Non-native species: An organism that does not naturally occur in a specific environment, including many culinary or ornamental plants. Highly adaptable non-native species with few natural competitors can become invasive.

NRCS: Natural Resource Conservation Service, a federal agency that provides technical assistance to landowners, including cost-share programs like EQIP.

ODNR: Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

Ohio Forest Tax Law (OFTL) program: Provides landowners with a reduction in property taxes in exchange for enacting an approved forest management plan.

Riparian buffer: An area along a stream or riverbank where plants, trees, and shrubs grow, filtering pollutants from nearby farm fields or roadways and thereby protecting water quality.

Snag: A standing dead tree. Provides important food and habitat for birds, fungi, insects and other wildlife.

Sugarbush: A forest that is managed for maple syrup production.

Timber buyer: See p. 4

Tree farm: A forest that is actively managed for specific goals, often associated with standards set by the American Tree Farm System.

Timber stand improvement: A combination of treatments designed to increase sunlight access and improve growth, diversity, and resilience of trees.

Urban canopy: The total overhead tree cover in a neighborhood, city, or suburb.

Vernal pool: Shallow depression, variably filled with water in the winter and spring, often dry in the summer and fall. Provides essential habitat for many forest species.

Woody debris: Branches, snags, logs, fallen trees, and root balls on a forest floor. Provides essential habitat and is important to soil health.



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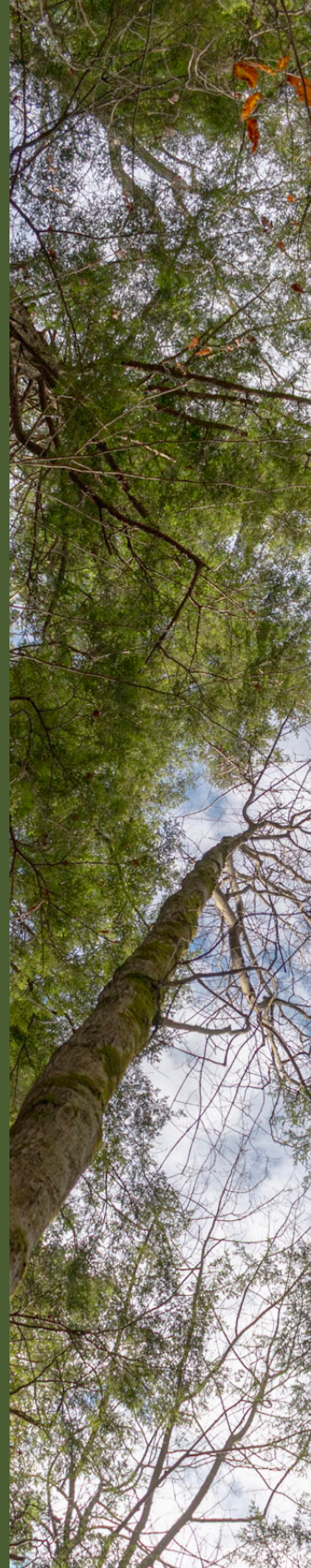


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