

## **Tennessee's 2011 Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year**

Jonathan Boggs

TDF Assistant District Forester

The Tennessee Tree Farm Committee is pleased to introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. Edward Polk, Tennessee's 2011 Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year. This annual award recognizes Tree Farmers who are doing an outstanding job of forest and resource management as well as promoting the Tree Farm Program through action and example. The Polk Tree Farm is a working example of dedication and love of nature, especially trees and wildlife.

Ed Polk was raised on a 220 acre farm in the Bellevue community of Davidson County in the 1950s where he learned to nurture the land and to hunt in the hardwood forests. After graduating from Bellevue High School in 1959, he attended Vanderbilt University where he earned a Bachelors Degree in Civil Engineering and a Master of Science in Environmental Engineering. Following college in 1966, he married Nancy Carolyn Gasser, of Cullman Alabama. He spent 3 years as a research associate studying thermal pollution at power plants and 7 years with the State of Tennessee Department of Public Health in the Division of Stream Pollution Control (now the Division of Water Pollution Control within the Department of Environment and Conservation). Ed wrote and published water quality management plans for the various hydrologic basins of the State. In 1976 Ed entered private practice with the firm of Environmental Management Planning and Engineering (EMPE, Inc.). The firm grew to employ 75 people and Ed eventually became President and finally Chairman of the Board. The firm was sold in 2001 and Ed retired from the private sector, but spent another 3-1/2 years with the Division of Water Pollution Control heading up the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permitting program.

Following the sale of the family farm in 1964, Ed began to miss the experiences that he had enjoyed on the farm and the attachment to the land that he had developed over the years. He wanted a place to roam and hunt (quail, rabbit, and squirrel were the primary game species in the 1960s as there were few deer and no wild turkeys in Middle Tennessee at that time). He also wanted access to hardwood to supply his woodworking hobby. With Nancy's backing, in 1968 he purchased a 205 acre farm in Dickson County in the Slayden Community. Most of the early days were spent remodeling a 1800s vintage log house and improving quail habitat on the property. As the deer population began to increase in the 1970s, attention was turned toward improving deer habitat and a food plot program was initiated.

When the quail population declined in the 1980s, Ed allowed many of the fallow fields to transition back to forest; however he observed how slow this process was and believed there should be a faster way to get desirable trees established. In 1998, a friend gave him 120 Virginia Pine seedlings. After planting these, Ed was hooked on managed reforestation and has now planted tree seedlings for 14 consecutive years.

Ed purchased an adjacent 30 acres in 1989 and another 116 acres in 2003. The latter tract had been planted in fescue pasture on steep slopes and was heavily overgrown in briars. With the help of the Tennessee Division of Forestry Restoration Incentive Program (TRIP), Ed contracted the planting of 22,000 pines on 42 of the steeper acres. In addition to these trees, Ed, with help from his family and some very dedicated friends, has personally planted over 9,900 trees, of which 6200 are hardwoods and 1200 are soft mast producing trees. Most of these trees were purchased from the Tennessee State Nursery as bare root seedlings. He plants 500 to 1000 trees per year and says he will continue each year as long as he is able.

Ed enjoys telling others about his successes and his failures. While encouraging all to plant trees, he lets you know that tree farming isn't as easy as just sticking the trees in the ground and watching them grow. First the area to be planted is cleared of tall weeds and briars, followed by two applications of herbicide to kill the fescue. Next a 10' by 10' grid is laid out using flags. The trees are planted by hand using a Dibble bar. Plastic tree shelters are placed over every other tree and staked. During spring and early summer, herbicide is sprayed around the trees (termed releasing) to kill competing vegetation. A rotary mower is also used to control competing vegetation between the rows. Releasing and mowing continue for several years until the trees are established well enough to compete with the surrounding vegetation, then the shelters and stakes are removed.

Ed is currently President of the Dickson County Forestry Association, a member of the American Chestnut Foundation, American Tree Farm System, and Quality Deer Management Association. He also belongs to the Walnut Council and was the only Tennessean to attend their recent annual symposium in Madison Wisconsin. He has held field days at his farm where tree planting and management techniques have been demonstrated.

Ed is approaching 70 years of age and he and Nancy have one son. Many people ask him the question, "Why do you plant trees that you or perhaps even your children will not see become marketable timber in their lifetime?" He replies "I am doing it for the grandkids, even though I don't have any yet." Because of their mindset on sustainable forestry, hard work and dedication the Tennessee Forestry Association is pleased to recognize Mr. and Mrs. Polk as the 2011 Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year.