

# Tree Farming From a Distance

Some people call themselves hog farmers. Others are corn or dairy farmers.

Chuck Edelen, whose farm is in Hancock County, Iowa, differs from most farmers in two significant ways: 1) His farm is located over 150 miles from where he lives and 2) the crop is trees.

“We’re trying to develop high value trees like walnut, white oak and red oak. We’re looking for fifty to sixty good trees an acre when it’s time to harvest,” Edelen said, sounding very much like a crop farmer.

## Establishment Methods, Tree Species Vary

There are not many management ideas for trees Edelen hasn’t seen or tried. He has witnessed red oaks flourishing from natural revegetation after a previous owner did some clear cutting. He’s planted seedlings of red, white and bur oak, ash, cedar and cottonwood in 1987, 1988 and 1998. Edelen has also planted black walnut, ash, white pine, silver maple, hybrid poplar, Colorado blue spruce and Ponderosa pine in 1987 and 1988.

Edelen has used several planting techniques, looking for methods that get trees off to a good start as well as looking toward harvest expectations. He has used natural regeneration with pine trees and direct seeding with walnut and oak varieties. He planted most of the land in rows with seedlings, then replanted by hand from seed in areas where the original trees died.

“I like the direct seeding method,” Edelen said. “It’s a heavy stand and they self prune.”

Edelen follows a written stewardship plan to guide him in managing his six stands of trees. Included in the plan is a measure to select the best trees, and then eliminate all the others near them to reduce competition.

“It’s called timber stand improvement, or TSI,” Edelen said. It gives more sunlight to the best trees and increases their growth significantly.”

## Hard Work, Professional Help

Despite being 150 miles from his 131-acre farm and working full time, Edelen has put in significant personal time in getting trees planted and growing well.



Chuck and Marian Edelen were named 2006 Iowa Tree Farmer of the Year.

He and his wife Marian do all the mowing. “I’m at the farm about thirty weekends a year and spend from ten to fifteen hours tending trees during those weekends,” Edelen said.

But he realized that wasn’t enough, so he turned to John Olds and Dave Lemkuhl of One Stop Forestry for professional help.

“I hired them as consultants and they’ve done an excellent job,” Edelen said. “I have also had excellent help from Wayne Fuhlbrugge and other DNR foresters.”

## Government Programs Available

Edelen used cost-share assistance from the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), and Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) programs. Those programs have helped him achieve his environmental goals.

“The restored wetland and prairie grasses on the farm work well with the trees to diversify habitat for wildlife,” Edelen said. He plans to seed 4 acres of wildflowers and prairie grasses next



Chuck Edelen, center, gets professional help in tree farming from John Olds, right, and Dave Lemkuhl from One Stop Forestry. He also gets assistance from IDNR, NRCS, and other state and federal agencies.

year. While he gets a great deal of satisfaction from the tree farm, Edelen says short term the reserve programs are needed just to pay the bills.

"I've been able to break even with CRP in establishing and maintaining the trees," Edelen said. "Our grandchildren will be the beneficiaries financially of this work."

### **A Welcome Diversion**

Edelen inherited the farm from his father, Walter, who had enrolled 106 of the 131 acres in the CRP. At the time, Edelen was the human resources director at Land O'Lakes. He carried out personnel actions during a period of tough times for company employees.

"This tree farm was a savior for Chuck. He would get off work on a Friday, change clothes, and head to the farm a different person," Marian said.

### **Giving Back**

The Edelens were selected as 2006 Tree Family of the Year. They have hosted field days, Arbor Day plantings, and had school classes on the farm.

"I also make presentations to service clubs and other groups on the benefits of trees," Edelen said.

Chuck now teaches human resources at Concordia University in Minnesota. Marian, who taught pre-school for years, is now a freelance instructor for parenting classes. The pair plan to combine talents to instruct for Project Learning Tree.

### **A Family Project**

"I've always liked to build things. This tree farm is no different," Edelen said. "I've always had an interest in trees and I love the outdoors." Edelen also inherited his father's love of trees.

"It's been a family affair," Marian said. "Chuck's father first saw the



**Edelen and Iowa DNR District Forester Wayne Fuhlbrugge talk about using cages to keep deer from browsing young trees.**

need for trees, and now the whole family takes part in growing them."

All this adds up to a family that is rooted in its love of trees. There is also a more simple answer. Trees just make sense.

"Trees are a renewable resource," Edelen said. "Everyone uses wood."



**The Edelens are getting excellent growth in walnut trees Chuck planted by hand from walnut seeds produced in older stands.**



**Chuck Edelen has spent as many as 25 to 30 weekends a year at the Edelen Tree Farm in Hancock County. He lives 150 miles away but finds peace of mind at the farm.**

