Coal Creek Tree Farm named Lewis County 2024 Tree Farm of the Year

Madsen Family's 628-acre farm honored by Washington Farm Forestry Association

From left, Eric Girton, Emily Girton, Sharon Madsen and Sam Madsen smile for a photo at Coal Creek Tree Farm in Chehalis.

By Emily Fitzgerald / emily@chronline.com

A typical household garden runs on an annual cycle, with gardeners planting their plots in the spring and harvesting later that same year.

Sam Madsen's garden, however, runs on a 50-year cycle and covers over 600 acres of land.

“What makes a tree farm a tree farm? It’s really just a forest that you manage, so I’m really just a gardener on a grand scale,” said Sam Madsen, who owns and manages Coal Creek Tree Farm alongside his wife, Sharon, daughter, Emily Girton, and son-in-law, Eric Girton, in Chehalis.

The family’s “garden” received the Lewis County 2024 Tree Farm of the Year award earlier this year.

“Thank you to the Lewis County Chapter of the Washington Farm Forestry Association for this incredible recognition. It is a privilege to be part of a community that values and celebrates forest stewardship,” the family said in a statement following the award ceremony in February.

The 468-acre plot in Chehalis that is now Coal Creek Tree Farm was home to two coal mines from the late 1800s to the 1940s, at which time the Madsens suspect the old growth forest was logged and mostly not replanted. A family took ownership of the property around 1953, logged the mixed-species trees on the land in the late 1980s and subsequently planted Douglas firs. That family then sold the property to the Madsens in 2010. The Madsens acquired an adjacent 160-acre parcel to add to the farm in 2020.

“We looked for a long time for timber land, and we never dreamed that we’d be able to find something so close to our house,” Sharon Madsen said.

While Sam Madsen didn’t become a tree farmer until his 50s, managing a tree farm was a dream of his since childhood.

He credits his grandmother, who was an “avid gardener,” and his experiences growing up in Madsen Shop & Supply and as a Boy Scout going on Weyerhaeuser-sponsored trips for that aspiration.

“I was probably indoctrinated,” Sam Madsen said of his interest in the forest industry.

Sam Madsen was the last of three generations of Madsens to own Madsen’s Shop & Supply in Centralia, which began as a small shop where Magnus Madsen would “fix anything with an engine” but is now best known for selling and repairing chain saws, according to previous Chronicle reporting.

Sustainable forestry, with a focus on being good stewards of the land and providing a healthy habitat for local wildlife, has been the Madsen family’s goal since they started Coal Creek Tree Farm.

“Logging and that sort of thing has gotten a bad rap over the years, and it deserved it. But that just isn’t the way it’s done anymore,” Madsen said, adding that the current forestry standards Coal Creek Tree Farm follows focus on balancing the need for forest products with the need to take care of the land.

“The word I use is conservation … where you can produce a product that’s useful to men and at the same time do the right thing for the land,” Madsen said.

A typical 50-year harvest cycle for the Douglas firs the Madsens grow at Coal Creek Tree Farm begins with Madsen planting about 450 trees per acre on cleared ground.

“And then you work really hard the first five years to get those little trees to prosper, because everything else in the world wants that space,” Madsen said.

Once the trees “get their little heads above the competition,” they’re essentially left to grow for the next 10 years, until it’s time to do a pre-commercial thin.

“In doing that … you pick out the ones that are prospering the most and that don’t have broken tops and all those other things,” Madsen said.

Those trees that are prospering are left to keep growing, while the ones with obvious defects are cut down. That process typically brings the tree count down from about 450 to about 300.

Then, the tree farmer waits another 15 years before going back to do a commercial thin, “which is pretty much the same as a pre-commercial thin, only that will generate enough funds to actually pay for itself a little bit more,” Madsen said.

The remaining 170-or-so trees are left to keep growing for another 15 to 20 years until it's finally time to harvest.

Then the cycle begins again.

“‘Society grows great when old men grow trees in whose shade they will never sit,’” Madsen said, quoting a Greek proverb. “It’s probably more of a metaphor of long-term making investments and going forward, but I am one of those old men, I guess in a literal sense.”

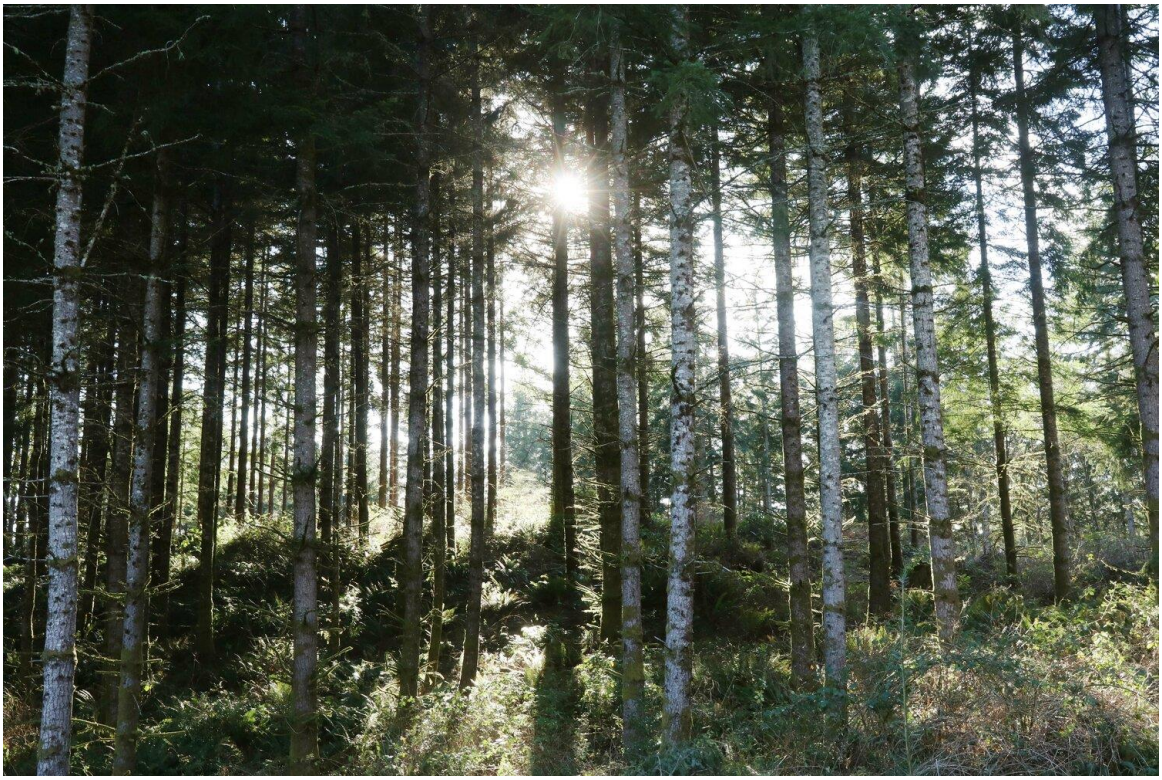
A picnic and twilight tour of Coal Creek Tree Farm will be held at 5:30 p.m., Tuesday, July 16.

For more information on Coal Creek Tree Farm, visit https://www.facebook.com/coalcreektreefarm/about_details.

Learn more about the Washington Farm Forestry Association at https://www.wafarmforestry.com/.

From left, Sharon Madsen, Eric Girton, Sam Madsen and Emily Girton examine a young Douglas fir

From left, Sharon Madsen, Sam Madsen, Emily Girton and Eric Girton walk through Coal Creek Tree Farm.



The sun shines through Douglas firs at Coal Creek Tree Farm

Mt. Rainier is seen through Douglas firs at Coal Creek Tree Farm

Sam Madsen points out Douglas-fir growing on the Coal Creek Tree Farm

Coal Creek Tree Farm in Chehalis displays its Lewis County 2024 Tree Farm of the Year award

Young Douglas firs grow in front of older trees at Coal Creek Tree Farm

Sam Madsen points out a whorl on a young Douglas fir, showing how much that tree grew in a year