Lewis County Tree Farm of the Year: Mary and Bruce McDonald

Plot near Lincoln Creek provides couple with a place to experiment and learn

Mary, left, and Bruce McDonald pose for a photo next to their Tree Farm of the Year sign at McDonald Tree Farm in Centralia on Tuesday, July 7.

By Jacob Moore / jacob@chronline.com
The Chronicle, July 11, 2026

Deep in western Lewis County sits what looks like a standard, remote 40-acre Douglas fir tree farm.

Tucked even further away in a small corner of that farm sits a forester's playground. A small plot of land across a creek and separated from the rest of the farm by a stream buffer zone was once a hayfield.

Today, Mary and Bruce McDonald are working on transforming it into a collection of the region's most recognized trees. They're learning each year how those trees grow best.

The process, Mary said, is called afforestation: the establishment of a forest or stand of trees in an area where there was no recent tree cover.

The couple has been managing their own little tree farm for 20 years.

This year, they received the honor of becoming the Lewis County Tree Farm of the Year.

They already celebrated with a twilight tour of their farm for members of the Lewis County Farm Forestry Association. This week, The Chronicle got a tour of its own, led by the landowners themselves.

The McDonalds manage their tree farm just like any other, adhering to the best tricks of the trade and making sure their stand of Douglas fir can be profitable through commercial thinning and, eventually, a clear cut.

But, back in the old pasture, they get to cut loose.

The space is akin to a scientist's laboratory. For Mary and Bruce, it is a place to plant, experiment and learn, and it requires much more attention than the uniform stand of Douglas fir trees. It was also a place to bring their three sons before they grew up, a place to teach them how to manage the land.

“We probably have spent maybe 5% of our time up there,” Mary said. “I mean, it’s much easier than this. This is where we have spent the other 90% of our time.”

The plot, which still features the groundcover of a pasture, includes a long list of tree species native to the Pacific Northwest. A long and narrow strip of maturing ponderosa pine stretches out near the property line. The western edge of the plot features a stand of cottonwood and ash trees intermingled.

Young cedar and oak trees dot the landscape, along with adolescent Oregon white pine, sitka spruce, great fir and others.

The McDonald farm first came to be in 2005 when the couple purchased the plot in a public auction while living in Amboy, near Battle Ground.

According to Bruce, the little parcel was a liability for the larger timber land owners, so they sold it. The plot is tucked away near Lincoln Creek and accessible only by a 4-mile privately owned Weyerhaeuser road.

When they purchased the land, it had recently been clear cut and replanted. What is now the test lab was a hay field. Now, the fir trees are near the right age for commercial thinning and a chance at some revenue, while the former hay field is a hot bed for arboreal experimentation.

According to the couple, the state of their custom forest is the result of years of trial and error. They recall just within the first few years of owning the property, nearby Lincoln Creek backed up around the same time as the 2007 flood. The event covered the entire plot with mud and wiped out virtually every tree they had planted in their earliest attempts.

“We’d already planted it with alder and cedar,” Bruce recalled.

“These are the only alders that survived,” Bruce said, pointing to a nearby tree. Using a shovel and his hand, he signaled just how much mud had caked the transforming pasture.

They’ve faced other challenges, as well.

Bruce remarked that the Sitka spruce they planted usually prefers the coast. All of the ones they’ve planted have stayed low and wide, resembling bushes as the tops die off.

“They grow into the bushes because the tops all die, because we're off site,” Bruce said. “We're further than 10 miles out from the coast.”

Cedar, oak and other adolescent trees have struggled to survive, being eaten by deer and even once by neighboring cows that escaped their pasture. A few are pushing through nonetheless.

Different young trees are supported or protected in different ways. Some are wrapped in nets or tubes to protect from large wildlife. Some young pines have aluminum foil wrapped around the base to deter weevils from taking a bite and killing them or stunting their growth.

The career foresters have always known that they wanted some land to manage themselves. In some ways, it was a learning experience. In other ways, it was a way to show the people they worked with how much they really cared about the trees. It’s also a way to relate with small timberland owners.

“You’re invested, not just in your thoughts, but in your pocket,” Mary said.

Mary served as the head of the small forest landowner office under the Washington state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) for many years. Bruce also worked for DNR, but in the final years of his career he took a job managing thousands of acres of forest land at Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

“That was part of where I spent a lot of my time, working with small forest landowners, and when I was working, and so that was something that I wanted to do,” Mary said. “I could talk about my experiences, and they could talk, you know, saying, ‘Hey, I'm having this problem. I'm having that problem, too.’”

Mary and Bruce are now retired, but they stay active with small forest landowners and with managing their tree farm. Currently, they are preparing for a commercial thinning of their plot and still toying with their fledgling arboretum.

The couple, who live near Olympia, also have another small parcel of land in Western Washington that they spend their time managing.