Lewis County's Tree Farm of the Year Honor Goes to Randle Duo

By Owen Sexton / owen@chronline.com The Chronicle, June 24, 2023

Over 70 visitors are lead on a tour through the Boyer Family Tree Farm by Merc Boyer in Randle on June 20.

When Morris "Merc" and Nina Boyer purchased a tree farm on Kiona Road in Randle in 2014 that sat unmanaged for eight years after being logged, they knew it would be a challenge to restore the land's tree life.

Since 2014, the Boyers have cleared countless bunches of Scotch broom, Himalayan blackberry and other invasive vegetation while planting thousands of trees in an effort to revitalize the forest land. For their efforts, the Boyer Family Tree Farm has been named the Lewis County Farm Forestry Association's (LCFFA) 2023 Tree Farmers of the Year.

On Tuesday evening, the couple hosted a tour of their farm to showcase their progress and highlight challenges they still face in raising young trees. More than 70 people showed up, including some from as far away as Oregon.

Some were fellow tree farmers, others were simply curious. LCFFA members, representatives from the state Department of Natural Resources and U.S. Rep. Marie Gluesenkamp Perez's staff were also in attendance.

Because the land saw inadequate reforestation between logging in 2006 and the Boyers' purchase, it lost the Designated Forest Land (DFL) classification from Lewis County.

Thanks to the Boyers' efforts, not only has the land been reclassified by the county as DFL, but the tree farm was recognized by the American Tree Farm System and the Boyers were certified in forestland stewardship earlier this year.

While invasive vegetation is an ongoing problem, Merc Boyer explained there were many other challenges in revitalizing the forest land including competing vegetation, pumice soil, droughts, root rot and blister rust, to name a few.

"Deer are also a problem, so are elk. They browse the seedlings and rub against trees" he said.

Vexar mesh tubes are used to try to protect juvenile trees from animals, but the elk have learned they can use their antlers to simply lift the Vexar off and get to the trees according to Merc Boyer. To combat the deer and elk rub problem, the Boyers have used trees that many consider to be a weed, red alder, which has other benefits as well.

"It fixes nitrogen (levels), it improves the soil, it is immune to root rot, you can get a crop in 35 years and I high top it. You can cut it and it can keep growing," said Merc Boyer. "Why do I cut it high? Because when that deer or elk comes in, I'm hoping they rub on (the alder tree trunk) instead of (juvenile trees)."

Alder is just one of 24 species of trees now growing on the property, and the Boyers are planning on planting four additional species as well. The main tree with the highest survival rate is Western white pine.

Given the porous pumice soil and extended dry conditions becoming more frequent, many of the Douglas fir trees the Boyers initially tried planting didn't survive. The tree farming couple even tried alder clones that were supposed to be drought and frost resistant, but those died, too.

On the advice of his son-in-law and other fellow tree farmers, the Boyers began planting Western white pine, which so far has had about a 90% survival rate.

While Western white pine is the most abundant tree on the farm, there are still plenty of others. Tree species diversity has many benefits including drawing birds to the area. Using the Merlin Bird ID app, Nina Boyer together with friends has now identified more than 50 species of birds that now regularly visit or call their tree farm home.

During the tour, Nina Boyer identified a warbling vireo.

"They're kind of a yellow-and-olive-green type bird, I thought the only yellow birds around were goldfinches, but there's a whole bunch that live around here," she said.

During their restoration efforts, the Boyers also had a well drilled on the property to tap into the local aquifer. The high quality of the water was what prompted the Crystal Geyser Water Company's desired plant along the Cowlitz River, Merc Boyer said. After outcry from locals about the proposed project, Crystal Geyser's plan died after action from the Cowlitz Tribal Council and Lewis County Commissioners in 2019.

"I have never been so proud to be part of this community, than when I saw the local people stand up, speak out and shut down Crystal Geyser, and tell them they are not going to deplete our aquifer," Merc Boyer said.

The tour lasted nearly two hours as the Boyers explained complexities of forest restoration.

Merc Boyer holds up a map while talking about a wildlife meadow at the Boyer Family Tree Farm in Randle on Tuesday, June 20.

Kelly Starling uses a STIHL saw to cut the top off an Alder tree during a tour of the Boyer Family Tree Farm.

Nina Boyer smiles before talking about birds at the Boyer Family Tree Farm in Randle on Tuesday, June 20.

Merc Boyer holds up an elk antler while talking about how to prevent tree rubbing

Over 70 visitors attend a forestry tour through the Boyer Family Tree Farm, lead by host Merc Boyer, in Randle on Tuesday, June 20.