

Building a Legacy with Trees



The way Jim and Jody Kerns see it, trees will tie their six children to the land for years to come.

“Our goal is to build a legacy *for* our children *with* our children,” Jim says. “The trees our kids have helped plant will grow along with our kids. In the big picture, looking down the road, our children may leave, but I think the trees will always tie them back to the land.”

The couple from Edgewood in northeast Iowa wouldn’t always have said that. Their strong bond with trees wasn’t made, Jody says, until they began talking with Iowa Department of Natural Resources forester Jerry Kemperman after they purchased their first farm.

“We bought our first farm – 40 acres – when we were young, 22 and 24 years old,” Jody says. “We saw it as an investment.”

The farm had cropland, pasture and timber on it. “I cropped it for a few years, and rented the pastureland, but it wasn’t working out real well,” Jim says. “I thought there must be something else better to do with the land. Our turning point for tree planting came when I went to a forestry field day and later had Jerry Kemperman come to the farm.”

“I thought I’d have to plant trees on the pastureland, but Jerry said there were tiny walnut seedlings all over, and they would grow if we took the cattle off,” he says. “We did and they grew.”

The Kerns later entered 15 acres of cropland on that farm into the Conservation Reserve Program, planting it in red oak, white oak, hickory, walnut and ash, as well as some red and white pine. They have since bought two other farms, returning to their roots when they purchased the farm Jody grew up on from her parents. Trees play a major role in each of the farms. They’ve

The first trees Jim and Jody planted near Wood Center more than 15 years ago are still Jody’s favorites. The hardwoods and pine trees were planted with help from USDA’s Conservation Reserve Program.



The entire Kerns family works at planting and tending trees on the farm. From left to right are Baili; Emma Rose; Noelle; Madalyn; Payson; Jody; Jim; and Ava. The children are learning about trees as they grow, far left, and each of them gets trees planted in their name the year they're born (Payson's area on left, Emma's on right.)



planted 40 acres of trees in all, and have 180 acres of timber and 58 acres of prairie grasses. The trees and grasses cover about half the land in their tree farms. Their plantings include a beautiful windbreak, planted in 1999, around their farmstead.

The Kerns rent their cropland and pasture. Jim's fulltime work is the Edgewood Locker he owns in nearby Edgewood. Jody is an x-ray technician and religious education director at their church.

Tree Plantings Tied to Children

"We've planted trees as we could, a few acres at a time over the past 20 years," Jody says. "Since it's a passion Jim and I share, it's been a cool part of our marriage. It's been neat to experience through our children, too," she says.

The Kerns mark tree plantings in time to coincide with their children's birth and other events. "This year's tree planting was done the same year our youngest daughter, Ava, was born," Jody says.

They also invite school classes to the farm, and do some special plantings with classmates of the Kerns children. "We have had school classes out to the farm regularly. Each time one of our kids was in second grade, starting with Baili nine years ago, the whole class has planted trees. The kids would pair off to each plant a tree," Jody says. "It's been fun to watch as the kids bring their friends back to see how the trees have grown."

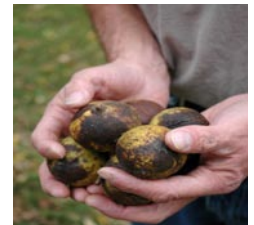
The Kerns encouraged the school to use their farm for high school classes, too. High school teacher Dave Millis has designed an environmental science course where juniors and seniors spend considerable time at the farm. A key study area is the Volga River, which borders their farm on the west. Among the many Kerns tree plantings are willows they planted along a stretch of the river to stabilize eroding streambanks.

Family Labor

"I think work is a good thing for a child," Jody says. "Payson is 14 and

he's helped work up the land. All the kids have picked up nuts for planting and hand-planted trees. This year, the family picked up about 150 bushels of walnuts and a 24 bushels of acorns for red and white oak planting. They help with the planting, too," Jody says.

"They groan a little like all kids would. They put some sweat in, but they get back from it, too," Jody says. "Our oldest three hunt, and they have friends out to the cabin. Jim has deer feeds there for them and their friends, and other things," she says.



Planting walnuts trees from seed is a family affair.

Professional Guidance

"Anyone thinking about planting trees should surround themselves with supportive people," Jody says. "I truly believe there are a lot of people who want to do great things with the land. What they need is encouragement

and support from the local NRCS, FSA and DNR offices. It comes down to customer service-- we've been lucky and hooked up with the right people," she says.

"The first meeting with professionals is important," Jim says. "Jerry sparked us. You need to work with a forester and follow the plan they give you. Don't skip a step in the plan-- that could cause a failure."

"We like doing all the labor ourselves, so working with Bruce Blair, our DNR district forester, and the NRCS and FSA is a good arrangement for us. If you don't have the time to do the work yourself, a consulting forester would be a big help," Jim says.

One of Jim's favorite days of the year is the annual consultation he has with Blair, when they walk the entire farm and talk about options and what needs to be done.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Essential

"We wouldn't have planted so many trees or prairie grasses without the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)," Jim says. "We love the CRP. It helps us protect highly erodible land that shouldn't be farmed, and that CRP check helps you with expenses through

the first 10 to 15 years," Jim says.

The Kerns have planted a riparian buffer of trees and grasses along the Volga River with CRP assistance. The prairie grasses were established on erosive land with that program as well.

Trees Serve as IRA

"We call our timberland our IRA investment," Jody says. "We know it's a good investment long term. The difference between trees and other

IRA's is that we get to enjoy and use our IRA as the investment grows," Jody says.

The Kerns plant trees on steeper land, and land that doesn't have easy access for farming.

"Long term, there's no doubt in my mind our 40-acre tract at Wood Center will be worth more as timber than it would be as a 40-acre corn field," Jim says. "We can already see that. On CRP land that isn't meant to ever farm, trees are a good decision."



The Kerns have made their woodlands, complete with a secluded cabin, a focus of family life. At the cabin are Jody and Jim and their three youngest, Ava, Emma Rose and Noelle. The trees below were planted with a spoon.



Balancing Wildlife

"I like wildlife, and try to find a balance between the trees and wildlife objectives," Jim says. "I like food plots, which attract deer, and more deer means more damage to the small trees they eat. We've learned you have to put a fence around young trees," Jim says.

The trees and grasses make turkeys and pheasants more comfortable, Jim says. He's noticed the riparian buffer and prairie grasses have attracted bobolinks and many other birds.

Jim has used his farm and trees to mentor a number of area youngsters on how to hunt safely and enjoy the sport to its fullest. They're youngsters who otherwise may not have had the opportunity to learn to hunt. "He gets so excited watching a young hunter experiencing success," Jody says.

Dealing with Nature

"Jim has a green thumb for planting trees," Jody says. "He really does." But Jim says he's had his share of problems.

"We've probably had every problem you could have," Jim says. "Things just go wrong. You have to be prepared to have failures," he says. "You have to deal with nature. Sometimes you do what you think is the wrong thing, and it works. Then the right thing doesn't. There are so many uncertainties- the weather, wildlife damage, flooding, soils- what works one time in one place may not work the next time."

Jim recalls building a one-row nut planter to put new rows of trees between existing rows in a pasture to get a canopy more quickly. Squirrels dug up all the newly planted, well-spaced acorns two years in a row.



Talking Trees, Awards

Jim and Jody talk with other tree growers regularly. Jim is President of the Northeast Iowa Forestry Advisory Committee, and the Kerns are members of the Iowa Woodlands Association and on the Iowa Tree Farm Committee. Jody serves as the tree farming representative on the State Soil Conservation Committee, traveling to Des Moines for monthly meetings.

The two have received numerous awards for their work, including Iowa Tree Farm of the Year in 1997 and North Central US Region Tree Farm of the Year in 2002. Other awards have come from Pheasants Forever and the Society of American Foresters.



Didn't See it Coming

The Kerns say they get a great deal of satisfaction from seeing success in their tree plantings and management.

"I like the big picture planning, watching the trees, prairie and wildlife work together," Jim says. "I like the challenge of proving to ourselves that we can make it work. Early on, it was a cash flow concern. Now, we look at the best use of the land and wildlife."

"Every tree planting on our land is special in its own way," Jody says. "The first planting at Wood Center will always be my favorite, though. We never dreamed all this could happen when we started this 15 years ago."



Prairie grasses mix with trees on the Kerns land (above). Tree planting on the Kerns farm included willows as part of a major streambank restoration project along the Volga River (below).

