

KEY PENINSULA NEWS

The Voice of the Key Peninsula

Long branch couple restores a forest

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Martha and Steven Konicek never planned to own a tree farm. But in 2017 their neighbor clear-cut 40 acres and considered selling a nearby 40-acre parcel, land that Martha's father's cousin had owned and where she had roamed as a child. Fearing it, too, would be clear-cut, Martha decided not to let that happen.

"So, to protect the land and to protect ourselves we bought it," she said. "Then the question was, what do I do now? I have this forest. The goal is to restore. What does restore mean?"

The Koniceks bought 20 acres. A friend purchased the remainder and is coordinating with them to steward the land. It meant refinancing the Konicek's home, which was nearly paid off. "Banks won't give loans for bare land," Martha said.

A fourth generation Tacoma native, Martha began visiting Longbranch in 1971 when her parents bought land and a trailer. Her father's cousin, George Thornton, owned 40 acres of forest nearby that she loved exploring. Nearly 25 years later, she and Steven purchased her

parents' land, built their home and settled into their jobs: Martha as a hospice nurse and Steven as an internist at Madigan Army Medical Center.

Martha's first step was to contact Washington State University Extension Forestry. She enrolled in an online forest stewardship program where she learned about such things as the life cycle of trees, soils, wildlife, invasive plants and fire prevention. The goal of the program was to create a forest management plan. With an approved plan the land would qualify for the Pierce County forest land property tax program, reducing the tax on their 20 acres to \$36 a year. The county in turn would receive a percentage of the income when trees are logged.

Martha made many connections through the stewardship course and said she sought information from anyone and everyone: Hopkins Forestry, the Washington Farm Forestry Association, Washington Department of Natural Resources Forest Stewardship and Technical Assistance, and the WSU Extension Forest Steward Program. "It was talking, talking, talking to foresters who are all over the place on their theories about how to deal with climate change," she said.

The land had been selectively logged in its early days, but when financial hardship hit the Thornton family, it was more heavily logged and poorly managed. The Koniceks' first year was devoted primarily to site preparation, removing Scotch broom that had grown to 15 feet and blackberries that were choking out native plants. They planted 100 cedars.

The following year they purchased a tractor to prepare compacted areas for planting and remove brush. It was a planting year, with 500 seedlings, mostly grand and Douglas fir. They lost 70 percent of the trees.

Martha said the heavy losses were probably due to a number of factors, including poor seedling quality and an unusually dry year. Steven designed a watering system with a marine battery and two 60-gallon tanks they could transport with their tractor, but it was too little too late.

They planted again the following year, 2019, but they planted fewer seedlings and tried different species, including western white pine and more cedars. Martha attended a seminar on the benefits of the intricate mycelial root system of fungi, and decided to treat each seedling with a root bath.

She mulched and enriched the notoriously poor Key Peninsula soil with compost. She collected data, using a rain gauge and moisture probe to better understand the conditions.

With the invasive Scotch broom and blackberries eliminated, bracken ferns thrived and provided natural shade. The seedling survival rate was 90 percent.

In July 2019 their land, Tipperary Forest, was officially certified as a tree farm by the American Tree Farm System.

This year will be another planting year, but with fewer trees and more deciduous species — big leaf and vine maple, Oregon white oak and white pine. And they are putting in a pond. There is no water source on the land now.

“My long-term goal is to create a habitat for wildlife in a warming climate,” Martha said. “Having water is pretty critical. But it will also mean I can’t log within 300 feet of the pond.”

There have been challenges. Both Martha and Steven continue to work and they devote eight to 18 hours a week to the forest, depending on the season. One 4-acre area needs thinning and finding a logger to selectively cut a relatively small parcel has been a challenge. Hopkins Forestry is coordinating hiring a logger for their forest, their neighbor’s forest, and with Sound View Camp. Logging has become mechanized and is geared to clear-cut. “No one uses chainsaws anymore. If Sound View weren’t also looking for this kind of work, I am not sure what we would have done,” Martha said.

They think that by the five-year mark the forest will be at a stable maintenance level and require less hands-on work. The trees will continue to grow and won’t be ready for harvest for decades. Thinning the recently planted trees will be done at a stage that requires pruners, not chainsaws.

“It is an interesting learning curve,” Martha said. She looks at trees through a different lens than she did just a few years ago. She sees land that has been logged and managed well, with a diversity of healthy trees. She sees forests that were planted in Doug fir but have not been thinned, making for a less healthy forest. She sees cedar trees that are dying but could be valuable as telephone poles.

The Koniceks also consider their legacy: how to protect the forest for the next generation.

Source: <https://keypennews.com/longbranch-couple-restores-a-forest/>