

Tree-planting efforts make mountain green

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Head up the mountain near his home at 7 am and return at 5 pm. That's been Yi Houzhang's daily routine for most of the time since 1995, as the 75-year-old has been devoted to just one thing day after day — planting trees.



The perseverance of the senior resident of Xita village, Ma'anshan city, Anhui province, has seen more than 130 hectares of barren mountain transformed into lush forest.

The achievement has not been easy, but Yi is fascinated by the work. "I have liked greenery since childhood," he said when interviewed by Anhui Daily last year.

In 1995, when Yi heard on the radio that individuals could contract barren mountains for afforestation work, he didn't hesitate to sign a contract with the local forestry administration to plant trees on Xita Mountain.

To finance his ambitious plan, Yi sold all his livestock — one cow and three pigs — to buy saplings. He also mobilized his seven family members to participate, including his mother.

Back then, the mountain was so rocky and barren that it was not unusual to see sparks fly when he used a pickaxe to dig holes, he recalled.

While it was difficult to plant the saplings, it was even more challenging to water them, and he had to use a shoulder pole to carry buckets up the steep, roadless mountain slope.

It didn't take long before his hands were severely chapped. After a decade of hard work, more than 130 hectares of trees had been planted, but a wildfire in 1996 burned most of the trees to ashes.

The family's efforts to bring the fire under control by beating the flames with tree branches and clothing were in vain, and eventually only about 20 hectares of trees survived.

Saddened but undaunted, Yi quickly restarted his afforestation work with his family. For months, they lived in makeshift houses they built on the mountain's slopes so they would have more time to plant trees.

The fire taught Yi a good lesson, though. Making full use of the few breaks he could enjoy from planting trees, he visited a number of forestry research institutes and State-owned tree farms to learn about fire control.

The knowledge he obtained allowed him to change the types of trees he planted, and also build fire paths.

When Yi's wife died in 1998, she was still involved in the tree-planting efforts. In 2004, Yi fell into a large pool containing boiling water at a public bath, leading to severe burns on 82 percent of his body. Now, whenever he walks downhill it feels as if his skin is being torn off.

The injury has never prevented him from throwing himself into planting trees, though, and his persistence won him the title of national model worker in 2005.

Now, the entire Xita Mountain is covered by trees, and Yi has established a tea garden spread over almost 5 hectares.

"I can make about 50,000 yuan (\$7,165) a year from the garden and another 10,000 yuan from intermediate cuttings," he said, "I spend all the money on forest management."

While Yi's spirit is willing to keep his passion alive, his flesh is growing weaker and weaker as he gets older. Despite that, he is determined to continue working on his great passion with the help of his children.

For years, Yi Chengbing has joined his father in the afforestation work. That commitment has seen him named as a model worker of Anhui.

"When I am unable to work, I will be succeeded by my children," Yi Houzhang said.

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