

READING EAGLE

Berks couple's forest project expected to yield 700 trees on their property

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Rick Hartlieb is assistant district forester with the William Penn Forest District. He helped Jay and Martha Ressler with their forest project.

- Reading Eagle



Jay Ressler attaches a shelter to a stake for one of more than 700 saplings planted on his Tilden Township property in early April.



Cindy Walls helps plant trees at Jay and Martha Ressler's property in Tilden Township.

- Courtesy of Jay Ressler



Libby Cerullo helps plant trees at the Ressler's.



Glenn Sweigert helps Jay and Martha Ressler plant their forest in Tilden Township.



An eastern red cedar seedling.

- Courtesy of Jay Ressler

In normal times, a forester's spring days are full of field visits and giving face-to-face advice on the best trees to plant.

"It's very strange," said Rick Hartlieb, reached on Arbor Day to comment about a Berks County planting project.

"Typically, we would be running around, doing 50 presentations," said Hartlieb, assistant district forest manager at William Penn Forest District.

Blame the stasis on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fortunately, the quarantine didn't stop Martha and Jay Ressler's forest project. In about five years, they expect to see a mini forest of 700 trees flourishing on their Tilden Township property.

"We're gifting Berks County with more oxygen," said Martha, adding, "I've always loved trees. I'd be missing, and mom would find me up a tree."

Nature lovers and artists, Martha, 71, works with fiber, and Jay, 72, is a photographer. Since they moved there in 2010, they have made their property at the base of Blue Mountain a haven for birds and pollinators.

A forest is defined as at least 1 acre of land that's not maintained as lawn, with the primary vegetation being trees. When Martha heard that, she started her research, and contacted Harlieb.

The planting was the easy part, said Harlieb. The follow-up is the most time-consuming.

Each tree sapling is protected by a vertical plastic tube called a tree shelter (\$4-\$7). These keep deer from destroying the seedlings, and keeps them from drying out and blowing away. A hardwood stake is attached to the tree shelter to keep it upright. Stakes were cut by a local saw mill from dead ash trees Jay cut down along the edges of the property as part of preparing the land.

Each shelter is topped with a bird net to prevent birds from getting trapped in the tube.

Keeping these trees happy until they fluff out of their protective cocoons will require careful mowing and maintaining of the tree shelters, Harlieb said. One danger is that the stakes could rot, leaving the saplings to blow over in the wind. The grass has to be kept 2 to 3 feet away from the tubes, not only so it doesn't compete with the trees for nutrients, but to avoid creating a habitat for mice and voles.

Those little critters can build nests and feed on the bark of the saplings or nibble their roots, Harlieb said.

"Tree tubes aren't perfect by any stretch of the imagination," he said. "They are kind of a necessary evil."

Tree selection

"Rick walked the land with us, and gave us a list of trees," Martha said. "We took copious notes, and researched species."

"They wanted to maintain their view of the mountain, so we had to use some lower growing trees," such as red buds and dogwood, Hartlieb said.

Based on their soil, the project included lots of hardwoods, such as oaks, red maple and birch, plus 75 eastern red cedar. The saplings came in containers (\$3-\$4.50 each) from a nursery in Lancaster County. Bundles are cheaper, costing about \$12 for 25, but with bare roots, the trees are more fragile. There's a greater survival rate with containers, Hartlieb said.

The saplings are from local seeds, which contributes to the success rate.

"So the trees you're growing are coming from parent trees grown in our climate," he said.

Jay and Martha had planned for an April 1 planting party.

"I had Boy Scouts lined up, and I was going to make food," Martha said. "But then this happened," she said of COVID-19.

All of their planters canceled on them - except three.

Friends to the rescue

With the help of friends Cindy Walls, Libby Cerrulo and Glenn Sweigert, the couple completed the planting on April 6. They maintained social distancing as they used a gas-powered auger to dig holes, and sawed points onto the ends of 700 stakes to support the tender saplings.

"Glenn is the fastest tree planter I've ever seen," said Martha, who is making a quilt to show her gratitude for her friends.

Martha is excited for the public to see her forest, and plans to be a stop on the next Hamburg Garden Tour.

"I would predict an 80% success rate the first growing season," Hartlieb said. "It's all luck, weather and making sure the stars line up."

The vertical tree shelters have to stay on until the trees are big enough to withstand deer browse - four to five years.

"It's our legacy," Martha said.

For help establishing or taking care of a forest, landowners in Berks County can call forester John Nissen at 610-582-9660