

Treeways

2025 7

Yes, You Can Plant a Forest ... or a Prairie Meadow ... or a Labyrinth

The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago, the next best time is now (Chinese proverb).

Please read the short book. "The Man Who Planted Trees" by Jean Giono. This book is an inspirational story of a man who made it his life's work to plant trees in an environmentally devastated valley. Planting trees one day and one tree at a time he brought the valley back to life. This is not the story of a real person, but a lovely and realistic story, nonetheless.

Yes, you can plant a forest! If squirrels and blue jays can plant a forest, so can you and it doesn't have to take a lifetime.

Planting trees ... a little planning, a little preparation, a reasonable investment of time and materials and you too can plant your own forest. Start with one tree and go from there.

It could be a traditional native oak savanna, a native woodland, a food forest, a micro forest, a mini forest, a pocket forest, a forest garden, or a bee and bird forest. **Minimum size is probably 12' X 12' although a mini forest the size of a tennis court or larger is better.** Forests of any size are good. Make this the year we start or enlarge our common woodlands. There are many good online resources available and there are plenty of forestry professionals available too. Afraid you might do something wrong. Don't worry, come to the Sunfish Lake Arbor Day Event the first Saturday in May, and get hands-on coaching from the City Forester as you plant young trees in our lovely City.

A property known as a drug dealing, drug use, and dumping location that had become a significant problem for our City and our Police department. The property came up for sale in 2020, my wife and I bought it and we promised the City and the two adjacent churches that we would immediately tear down the decrepit shed and clean up the debris scattered liberally across the property. Debris included: a house size pile of broken windows, dozens of tires, 4 couches, three toilets outside (one full ... really), a clawfoot tub, water heater, sleeping blankets, an underground concrete bunker, drug paraphernalia, plus a three-stall garage sized shed. Two 40 cubic yard dumpsters got rid of the shed and most of the debris.

The entire property was infested with burdock and Canada Thistle taller than me. It was the kind of property where you couldn't see the land for the tall weeds. Covid years 2020-22 gave us time to mow many times with a brush mower plus apply multiple weed herbicide treatments to get the weeds under control. By fall 2021 the original Zehnder farmstead was starting to look like a grassy horse paddock again with a meadow of mostly grass with a few wildflowers.

By the end of 2022 we had planted 75 new baby trees (mostly Arbor Day tree sale size trees). Those trees included Norway spruce, white pines, and our orchard. By winter 2023 the total of new baby trees was up to at least 175 and by winter 2024 our developing forest totaled more than 300 new trees. The orchard produced a few apples and cherries in 2023 and apples, cherries, and apricots in 2024. During 2024 the baby white pines grew more than 2.5 feet and many are now more than 6 feet tall. There was always a plan to my tree planting madness and I definitely got my hands dirty while planting my personal forest. The long-term goal was building our retirement home, renovating the native grass and wildflower meadow, creating a walkable meadow labyrinth, and planting a new forest surrounding our new home.

Private property trees are typically chosen for color, size, speed of growth rather than **planting a tree where it will naturally grow well in the specific location** where it is planted. The 300+ trees in my personal forest are planted in their specific spots because one, they like the soil in the location planted and two, they will provide the benefits or view desired for that location. For information on planting baby trees or larger trees please see “My Baby Trees can Grow Faster and Healthier” in Treeways 2025 9.

Several tree species were already growing in small populations on this property including: boxelder, cottonwood, elm, walnut, blue spruce, eastern red cedar, lilac, sumac, silver maple, mulberry and hackberry. Buckthorn, honeysuckle, amur maple, burdock, and other invasive species are gradually being brought under control.

New conifer species we have planted include: white cedar, red cedar, white pine, Norway spruce, larch, bald cypress, and dawn redwood.

New hardwood species planted include: Frontier elm, American elm (disease resistant), American chestnut, hybrid chestnut, paper birch, hazelnut, ginkgo, witch-hazel, sycamore, serviceberry, Juneberry, gray dogwood, chokecherry, chokeberry, swamp white oak, red oak, pin oak, bur oak, hackberry, American yellowwood, crabapple, American plum, apple, pear, apricot, pie cherry, quince, and quaking aspen.

Trees yet to be planted in 2025 include: bur oak, chinquapin oak, white oak, hybrid chestnut, concolor fir, balsam fir, pawpaw, quince, Osage orange, pagoda dogwood, Nanking cherry, hackberry, freemania maple, pin oak, red oak, white pine, white spruce, and shagbark hickory. Summer 2025 will likely be the last major tree planting year at our acreage and future years will see minor additions and ongoing encouragement, as needed.

Spring 2025 also marks beginning the planting of our prairie labyrinth. After four years of gaining control of the intense weed problem, it is time to plant the labyrinth's bee lawn/low-grow grass pathways and prairie grass, sedge, and wildflower dividers. We will plant the pathways during spring 2025 and late fall will see winter seeding of the prairie plant dividers. Spring/summer 2026 will see the first prairie flowers blooming in the labyrinth dividers and 2027 and 2028 will be even showier with wildflowers.

One tree, one day at a time gets us from a weedy horse paddock and druggie hangout to a new forest and orchard plus a native grass and wildflower meadow with a walkable labyrinth pathway. I am so excited to see the forest, orchard, meadow, and labyrinth come to life and mature over the next 5-30 years!!!