

Excerpt from “The Ground at My Feet: Sustaining a Family and a Forest” by Ann Stinson



National Woodlands magazine is fortunate to have author and private woodland owner Ann Stinson allowing us to reprint a chapter from her intimate woodland owner book, “The Ground at My Feet, Sustaining a Family And a Forest.” (Stinson, Ann. Oregon State University Press. 2021). It is a very personal work that many woodland owners, and families in general will enjoy, leaving them inspired and grateful. Our thanks also goes to Oregon State University Press for allowing the excerpt to be reprinted.

Tomorrow, Four Seasons Forestry Services will start planting our clear-cut. Today, Dad and I are off to gather 6,600 seedlings. We drive the truck and trailer through the old timber towns of Tenino, Rainier, Yelm, and McKenna to Roy, Washington. Dad points out a cemetery. “A few old loggers are buried up on that hill. This whole area was easy pickings for early logging. The flat land was cleared and turned into farms.”

In Roy, Silvaseed processes conifer seeds for large timber companies and grows seedlings for small landowners like us. After we load our bags of western white pine into the trailer, I tour the warehouse. Stacked inside a walk-in freezer are containers with labels for Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland. They are full of seeds. I learn that each August, Silvaseed sets up seed stations all over Washington and people bring cones from different elevations and soil types. Silvaseed dries the cones, removes the chaff, discards seeds without embryos, and freezes finished batches for five, ten, twenty years.

I thought the planting was the beginning of our forest, but a whole new chapter has opened up, with

more people, more expertise, more science. Where is the beginning?

Pine purchased, we head to Tumwater, where Chris Whitson of Port Blakely is storing western red cedar and Douglas fir for us. We cover the boxes and bags with a blue tarp and head back down I-5, the start of a new forest in our trailer. My belly is full of anticipation. I’ve been waiting for the planting. I want to talk with the men on the crew, watch and listen to the process, be part of the job, be part of the bare land growing again.

Tim from Four Seasons calls. His mother has just passed unexpectedly at sixty-nine. They will plant Tuesday and Wednesday, have the service on Thursday, finish up on Friday.



In the evening, I make oatmeal and raisin cookies for the crew. Maybe at lunchtime they will sit outside so I can join and ask questions.

At 7:10, a white Four Seasons truck pulls up to the house. Dad and I leave our unfinished breakfast on the table and drive out to the cutover with them.

The crew—Guillermo, Abraham, and brothers Don and Tim—put on their gear, gather equipment and seedlings of western white pine, western red cedar, and Douglas fir, three species chosen to outwit root rot and global warming. The pine are one-year “plugs,” so small they disappear into the deep pockets of the bags and are hard to spot after planting. The bushy tips of the fir and cedar bush out up to the planters’ shoulders. Tim, Don, and Abraham work side by side, nine feet apart and pacing nine feet between each planting.

Scrape, scrape, scrape
shovel metal against river rock
laid down by glaciers thousands of years before
tap, tap, tap
boot heels on blade steps
push-pull, push-pull, push-pull
right hand on the handles
the ground opens up
left hands reach back to grab a seedling
bodies bend to gently place
the tree in the hole
men stand up
pull the shovel from the dirt
tamp down the soil around the planting
and walk another nine feet.

Lou Jean, Dad, and I tube the cedar as they are planted. Deer can munch the thriving green fronds into nubs overnight. We pull the innermost tube from yellow bundles of ten and weave a bamboo post through the mesh, bend to place the tube over the seedling, then push the post deep into the soil. We stand up, look nine feet ahead, and wait for the next seedling to come into focus against the dark soil and green ferns. Rocks obstruct my next post; I move it two inches to the right and it slides right down. Izzy finds a deer bone and happily chomps away. Dad stops tubing and prepares a backpack sprayer with Plantskydd, a deer deterrent made of pig or cow blood mixed with water. We will watch to see which cedar flourish best—those tubed or those treated with Plantskydd.

Tim is planting next to me.

I weave another tube. “You know, the last time



you guys planted for us, it was right after Steve passed.”

Tim taps his shovel with his boot. “Yes, I remember him being sick.”

I place the tube over the tree. “It’s good to be planting after someone dies.”

I’ve had almost five years to gain distance from Steve’s death. Tim’s mother’s service is in two days, and he looks at me quizzically but graciously replies, “Mmm, the cycle of life.”

At lunch, rain has started to fall and the planting crew sits in the truck. I can’t interrupt their meal with my questions, but the door is open and I hand them the cookies. Surprised, Abraham takes them; Dad and I head to the house, where I make grilled cheese sandwiches with Mom’s dilly beans.

I decide to follow Guillermo around with my notebook as he works.

I ask whether planting has changed any.

Shovel handles used to be wood—lighter, but broke too easy.

Tree bags have shoulder straps now, not just padded waistbands—more comfortable.

Companies want more area scarified.

Weyerhaeuser has changed planting spacing from 11.5' × 11.5' to 12' × 12'.

No more broadcast burns.

I ask Guillermo what he thinks about not burning at all, leaving more slash on the ground. He replies, “That’s crap.” He says it would decrease the number

of trees a worker could plant each day from 1,100 to 800 and so raise the cost of each from thirty to thirty-eight cents.

I work five hours. My back hurts, my hands are sore, and my mind is starting to go numb.

Dad is still tubing. Embarrassed to be outworked by my octogenarian father, I keep going. But after another hour, I head for home down the gravel road. I say hello to the saw-whet owl's home, to the branch that held the barred owl, and crawl between the sheets. At the annual meeting of the Lewis County Farm Forestry Association that night, Dad's legs cramp up and he is nauseated. He tells Mom he is going to work 10 percent less.

The first day of planting is a full moon and Mom's eighty-fifth birthday. We've been celebrating with liver pâté, cheese, and yellow roses. A friend has given her a book about Georgia O'Keeffe. "I'm relieved it's not the book by Rumi she and I have been discussing," Mom tells me. I ask why. "My relationship with Georgia O'Keeffe is timeless, not a burden." I want to know more. "At eighty-five, I can't keep up with a lot of things. I'm shedding chores, friends. Georgia O'Keeffe is not one of them."

The next day, Tim pauses as he packs his planting bag with cedar seedlings. "We had some cookies left over. My son and granddaughter are here from North Dakota for Mom's service. I gave the extras to her—she loves cookies." It's the first conversation he's started and I feel like I've been given a present.

I ask Tim what makes a good planter. "Well, we try to put just one tree in each hole—some guys try to give the bonus. And I try to get the green part up, the roots down." Don and Abraham laugh. It's nice of them to indulge my questions.

Guillermo was born in Michoacán, Mexico, and came to the United States in the 1980s. He's worked in reforestation since then, planting his first trees in the blast zone of Mount Saint Helens. This weekend he will plant trees on his own forty acres of land, just across the Cowlitz River from our farm.

I ask Tim and Don when they first planted trees. "Dad got us out pretty little," Tim says and indicates a height at about his waist.

"Did you get paid?"

"I don't think so."

"We used to earn a dollar an hour. If we wanted a raise, we had to tell Dad why we were worth more."

"At least you got something."

After our second planting day, the trailer stands almost emptied. I will not be at the farm for the final day. I shake hands with Tim, Guillermo, Don, and Abraham. "I really enjoyed working with you all. Can I call if I have more questions?"

When I return to the farm that weekend, I ask Mom whether she's seen the obituary for Tim and Don's mother in the local paper. I read her my favorite line: "Caroline enjoyed all activities the kids were involved in and was a strong supporter of Bearcat Wrestling, where at times it could be risky sitting next to her." I notice that she graduated from Toledo High about the time Lou Jean's brothers did. When Lou Jean reads it, she exclaims, "Her mother was my piano teacher." We'll have to tell Tim and Don the next time we see them.

A few days later, I walk out to the clear-cut. No shovel sounds, no voices, just two geese crying after each other along the ridge. I sit on a cedar stump and take out my notebook and listen. In the stillness, growth has begun. Surrounding my stump, six seedlings push their roots into the soil, stretching their spindly branches and needles to pull in the sun. Stumps sequester carbon dioxide and provide shade from the August sun. Deer droppings and logging slash decompose to form mulch, and beetles and earthworms tunnel, adding oxygen to the soil. Dad has named the cutover "Two-Snag." He knows that Steve will appear as a raven or a red-tailed hawk and perch on the two long-dead trees we've left.

I look out at the expanse of twelve acres: empty, but not empty. I am reminded of my nine-year-old self ducking my friend's head. I feel the absence of the tree that was cut from the stump that supports me. I am glad we're saving the old trees in Gemini Grove.

The cutover is near the house; it will be easy to get here and tend these seedlings. The trees in the clear-cut need me, need me to mulch them, to adjust the tubes protecting them from deer, to pull Scotch broom, cut Himalayan blackberries and honeysuckle. Their need satisfies a deep want in me. I wonder at the roots of this emotion, whether it helped propel hunter-gatherers to plant and domesticate. Why aren't humans satisfied with what the land gave them? Why ask more of the forests, the prairies, and the seas?

Mount Rainier is out in its full glory, double peaked and brilliant white. Snow fills the clear-cut patches in the Cascade foothills.