

Making a stand

Contributed by BOB HANSEN of The Hawk Eye
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Forester stocks the earth
with new plots of hardwood

SWEDESBURG - Geode Forestry recently was transplanted from Burlington's Winegard Drive to the more sylvan settings of the Henry County town of Swedesburg. But the move has not slowed 7-year-old company's growth or prevented it from offering a full package of forestry services to southeast Iowa and west-central Illinois landowners.

Owner Bob Petrzela uprooted Geode Forestry from its incubator parent, Geode Industries, in 1989 and now provides tree-planting services, timber sales and appraisals, forest management, as well as forestry consulting services for both private and government customers.

Geodefory building under construction in Swedesburg, Iowa

"When the Pzazz business center was closed to make room for FunCity, we were forced to make a move," Petrzela said, "and although we looked at a number of Burlington sites, the Swedesburg location made more sense. I'm from Mount Pleasant, and Gretchen Cline, the other forester, is from the Muscatine area so it made more sense. We have purchased six acres off of Highway 218 and as soon as I get a chance I will be putting up our buildings there."

Finding time to build offices, warehouses and garages may be difficult for the young company finds its business rapidly expanding as local landowners discover the aesthetic, environmental and financial advantages of establishing hardwood stands.

That demand sparks Petrzelka's frantic spring workload, illustrated on a dark Saturday afternoon when the forester and two tree planters raced the rain to plant a mix of oak, spruce, cherry and walnut saplings on a farm north of Danville.

Marc Miller, had convinced his grandmother, Myranell Dockendorff, to plant timber on a portion of her 300-acre farm and as he watched as Geode Forestry weave a web of saplings across a former hay field, he explained the economics of raising trees as a crop.

"This ground had been rented by farmers raising cattle, but there wasn't any money in that anymore so we looked at what hardwoods would do for us," Miller said. "Iowa's Department of Natural Resources will pick up 75 percent of the cost of the trees as part of their program of re-establishing hardwoods on Iowa's rougher lands.

"At some point, these trees will be harvested and, if we care for them properly, they will be pretty valuable," he added. "When you plant hardwoods, you have to take care of them properly and you have to take the long view. These trees are for our children or maybe their children."

A landowner taking part in the DNR program is obligated to take care of the trees and this initially will include a careful mowing around the trees at least three times during each year's growing season until the leaf canopy shades the ground and discourages weed and grass growth. Landowners also must fight a constant battle against marauding deer and insects.

"The landowner has a continuing responsibility once the trees go in," Petrzelka said. "But it can be worthwhile ... and it is not that unusual to see a planted area returning the landowner \$150 to \$160 a year per acre."

He said tree-planting programs are becoming increasingly popular as the cattle industry continues to consume fewer acres.

In addition to planting, Geode's package of services includes evaluations for land owners contemplating timber sales.

"Loggers will knock on a landowner's front door and ask if they want to sell some trees, but usually the farmer doesn't have any idea what

the trees are worth so they call us," he said. "We can give them a value, but we usually also tell them that a merchandisable tree's value is going to go up pretty quickly if you leave it in the ground. A walnut tree is earning the owner more on his investment each year than interest you will be getting from a bank on a savings account."

Geode Forestry also provides appraisals of trees for land sales, but he confessed

Geodeforestry building under construction in Swedesburg, Iowa

this is his least favored aspect of the business. Sellers often feel the value of the tree stand is too low, while buyers complain about high prices.

Spring is a forester's busiest season, but Petrzelka said mid-summer can be the slowest and the least pleasant to be in the field.

"The deep woods can be a pretty miserable place to be in the middle of August," Petrzelka said. "It gets so hot and you can't carry enough water with you. It is surprising, but to me, mid-winter is the best time to be in the woods. There is a quiet to it and everything is so much easier to see.

"Regardless of what time of the year it is, it is still better being in the woods than sitting behind a desk. Being outside and working is why I became a forester," Petrzelka said.

To contact Petrzelka, visit Geode's Web site at www.geodeforestry.com on the Internet.