

Counting Trees, Killing Wasps

Jim Minick for the July 18, 2006 Roanoke Times New River Current

They're our babies, in a way. And like the surprises that come with parenting, we had no idea what we were getting into, the amount of work, the joy of growth, or the demands of love.

In the last few years on this farm we've planted over 22 acres of trees, converting streamside pasture and abandoned grassland into what hopefully will one day be towering woods. Twenty-two acres can hold a lot of trees. All totaled, we've slipped over 3500 hardwoods and shrubs into the soil with another 3500 pines interplanted, over 7000 total. The pines need little "parenting." They get shoved in a hole, tamped in tight, and then they're on their own to poke through the weeds and push a spear into the sky.

The hardwoods, though, get fussed over. At planting time, after their roots are slipped into soil, they also get "tubed, staked and matted." The mat acts as a weed-barrier, the tube a miniature greenhouse, and the stake holds the tube. These seedlings are the coddled babies, some already growing to five feet, but most only three to twelve inches tall. If a pine dies, oh well, but if an oak or ash doesn't make it, I want to know.

So this is the part of tree parenting I hadn't foreseen, the annual visit to 3000 tubes spread all over the farm, the census-taking of the dead, and the quiet joy in the living. It's good exercise for the mind and body.

The typical walk in the infant woods requires first some tools and materials. My backpack pouch holds pen and paper for note-taking, zip-ties to replace the broken ones, and bright orange survey tape to mark the dead trees. It's thick, overgrown country, so I

wear long pants, gloves, and boots. Snakes and poison ivy love sandaled feet. I also bring at least 10 stakes along and a mattock to hammer in a stake or chop the thistle. At planting two years ago, we had a batch of “soft” oak stakes not properly cured. Now they are rotting and breaking, resulting in flopped tubes. If not caught and righted, the tree is permanently bent and has to be cut at the base or replaced, losing several years’ growth.

Then I hike the half-mile to the section of the day and start walking the lines of trees, all paced off at twenty-foot intervals. If the young cherry is poking out of the tube, touch it and say hello. Then tap the wooden stake. If it wobbles, tap it again to check for soundness. Replace if unsound.

If the seedling is dead, I wrap the tube with a length of survey tape, the orange marker a sign of where to replant next spring. And I keep a mental tally of how the number marked dead, so I know how many to order. This, of course, is easy in theory, but not in practice as I’m sloshing through thick grass or hacking at blackberries, and then think, “How many did I already mark, 12 or 13?” Time to count again.

All this might sound tame, like just a lot of work with little excitement. But wasps and yellow jackets charge this story. Like lightning to a tall pine, these creatures are drawn to our tree tubes. Half of all the tubes has a papery nest of eggs. I wouldn’t mind this except for the raccoons. In the past two years, the coons have ripped open a hundred or more tree tubes to get at these wasp nests, easy meals if you don’t mind a sting or two. In the process, the coons also usually destroy the tree inside the tube, so my parenting skills kick in; I want to protect my babies, so get rid of the wasps, and hopefully get rid of the coons.

The most useful tool in all of this is the mattock handle, not the mattock itself, but the round hickory that fits inside the tree tubes just right. Look down the tube and if empty of yellow jackets and full of a leafy seedling, move on. If full of a gray nest, slowly slide the handle down the tube and then squish it against the side and shove it to the bottom, tamping the bodies into the soil. This was easier in the spring, when only one wasp guarded her nest. Now in midsummer, every nest has at least five watchers ready to sting. The yellow jackets are especially fierce; sometimes I just tamp the nest to the bottom and scurry away from the angry buzz. I haven't been stung, yet, and I knock on my hickory handle every time.

In ten years, hopefully all the trees will be splitting open these tubes, no longer needing their protection. And hopefully by then, these baby hardwoods won't need my protective parenting either as I take a nap in their growing shade.