

BEAUTY IN THE ORDINARY

"There are magical places all around me."

Ann has a unique view of her property. She sees possibilities everywhere. What others might see as annoying tree stumps, Ann has turned into works of art. She loves to walk her woods and imagine what could be. "There are magical places all around me." One of Ann's goals is to learn how to use mapping software so she can map her many special places, such as bogs, wetlands, old apple orchards, and the cemetery. Ann gets great joy from these places and wants to share them with others. She envisions building trails that serve as invitations into the woods.

Ann had a gentleman friend with an excavator. "I thought I was in love," she said, "but it was just the excavator." She would love to own an excavator, which would make the work so much easier. And if she did, you'd probably find her on her land, on that machine every day. For now, she tends her land with the tools she has, including her chainsaw, tractor, and brush hog – her favorite tool! Owning this equipment and understanding how to use and maintain it is quite a learning curve.



Ann counts on her neighbor George for his help and guidance.

Ann recalls, "When I first started using a chainsaw, I got it stuck a lot. I'd be so exasperated." Now she does so much better releasing trees, opening up the apple orchard, and just cutting her own firewood. She has a Husqvarna XP model that's lightweight. "Even just a half pound can really make a difference when you're wielding a saw," she says. Feeling like she knows what she's doing now is what Ann counts as her biggest success. "I've spent enough time in the woods now and know what to expect. I'm going to be okay," she says with confidence.

With successes also come challenges. "You have to

stay physically fit," Ann says. "If I'm not strong, I can't be here." Ann doesn't want to get hurt so she won't have to listen to "some idiot" telling her to drive the tractor up the steep hill in the snow. This last sentence speaks to Ann's frustration as a single woman landowner in finding reliable advice and good networks. In some cases, Ann has found that in this male-dominated industry, she has had to tiptoe around egos. She has had to navigate the difference in being assertive without being viewed as "bitchy."

Ann's path to stewarding this land began in Chicago before her birth. Her mom's first husband worked for National Life. They would come to Vermont for annual meetings and both fell in love with the state. When he could not get life insurance due to pre-existing childhood conditions — complications from scarlet fever as a child — he invested in 130 acres and an old farmhouse in Washington, Vermont, as a legacy for his wife and their four children. After his death, Ann's mom remarried and Ann was born the fifth and youngest child. She was about six months old when the family ventured to Vermont and bought a "tourist house" in the valley. Her mom operated the house while her dad put himself through the University of Vermont (UVM) to become a teacher. They chose to leave Vermont and return to Illinois when her dad was offered a teaching job. They spent summers in Vermont as their plan was to retire here, but Ann's heart was already in Vermont, and summer's end always brought her sadness. It brings her comfort that her parents did get to spend their last days on the hill that they loved.

For many years, the inherited home on the hill, where Ann now lives, stood vacant except for a few cows that wandered through. It needed lots of TLC.

Then in the late 80s, Ann's dad retired and her mom's dream to be in the house on the hill came to fruition. The TLC was in abundance with family, friends, and boarders who worked in exchange for rent.

Ann is following in her father's footsteps when it comes to managing the land, though their motivations for working with the land are very different. She explains, "My dad was really interested in making the land pay. He was a money man; he had to raise all these kids on a teacher's salary and turn this land into something profitable." Ann's vision for the land is much more eclectic, though still governed by a management plan and being part of the Use Value Appraisal program.

"I am having a blast," she says, "with my little DR® walk behind." In a field that once was home to red pine, Ann is loosening the stumps and turning them into sculptures. "I'm taking my time kicking the stumps free, pulling them up, and brushing them off." These stumps become amazing works of art that Ann has displayed at a local gallery. "And finding hazelnut bushes! I've got hundreds of hazelnut bushes," she says. Ann is concerned about the loss of beech so has planted some oak. She also has four chestnut trees that are doing well, at least three of the four.

Ann gets so much joy just exploring places and making paths that are invitations into the woods.

But, for a long time, there was anxiety about her future on the land that offset some of the joy she found there. “I spent so many years just worried about what will happen to me when my Mom dies?” The worry came from the fact that all of the siblings would inherit the land in shared ownership. And, Ann was unsure of what her siblings’ desired outcome for the land would be when her mother passed away. She wanted to keep the land but could not afford to buy them all out. Ann sought help with legacy planning. In the end, Ann and her sister were able to buy out her brothers, and she now owns the land jointly with her sister and her sister’s children. Her co-owners let her have autonomy when it comes to managing the land, but she needs to keep them informed, and put up with a certain degree of second-guessing of her decisions, which can sometimes be frustrating.

Ann’s current succession plan is to leave her share of property to her nieces and nephews. She has learned that inheriting something isn’t always a gift, especially woodlands. She honors the fact that they’re her relatives, but what she’d really like to see happen is for the property to go to a local young couple

with a love, passion, and connection to the land. But, that is a worry for the future because Ann is too busy working on the land. Controlling introduced species is nearly a full-time job. Ann doesn’t know how many “hours, days, months” she has spent pulling up the wild chervil; and while she wasn’t looking, the goutweed took over. The Japanese knotweed is just below the house and hasn’t traveled down the brook because Ann keeps “whacking and piling and whacking again.”

There is a cemetery that Ann’s property surrounds. It’s the Fish Cemetery, named for the original family and it makes Ann very nostalgic to think about those who came before her. According to Washington town history, the land was a sheep farm when Vermont’s hillsides were dotted with sheep. And then they grew wheat to survive. “It blows my mind when I think of how hard it would have been to survive here on these rugged hillsides,” she says.



A view of Ann’s working forest.

As Ann travels her woods, on foot or machine, Ann is uncovering stone walls, making trails, and finding the next magical place or thing on her property. She has found bog iron samples and had moose sightings. She would love to have more visitors use her trails and enjoy the land as much as she does. And maybe even have a “stump digging” workshop to let others find those gems that she uncovers. Perhaps her favorite pine stump sculpture is what she calls Phoenix Rising. Maybe it’s a “woman’s heart” that sees beauty in so many places, that creates something from the very ordinary. Ann sees the land through a different lens and has an intimate connection with the property and its treasures. Ann knows one thing for certain. “When I look around, I don’t think there’s any place else I really want to be. I’m like my mother,” she says.

What would Ann say to other women woodland stewards? “It’s critical to stay physically strong, be physically fit, and have a good support system.” Ann reads Northern Woodlands Magazine, is a member of Vermont Woodlands Association, and her property is a certified Tree Farm in the Vermont Tree Farm System. She further recommends, “Use the resources available, like your county forester and landowner organizations such as VWA and Coverts. And stay engaged with other women landowners.”

