

THROUGH THE EYES OF A FORESTER

"If you have a chance to own woodlands and to take care of it, it's a feeling like no other, being a land steward."

"Go outside, now!" That's what Kathy remembers so clearly of her childhood in Westminster, Maryland. Her dad was a dairy farmer until he sold the farm when she was about six years old. "Although the animals were gone, it was still pretty rural and I spent a lot of time in the fields, in the woods, and climbing trees." Kathy always thought her future would be in agriculture, horticulture of some kind. But then when the time came and she visited College Park, home of University of Maryland, everything changed. "I'm not a large pond person. I'm a small pond person," she states.

There was one certainty however; Kathy would never spend her life at a desk indoors. She started looking at different schools, and forestry seemed very interesting. Her county had the first female forest technician at the Maryland Forest Service and she became Kathy's mentor. And, she attended Allegany Community College (now Allegany College of Maryland), which had the only forestry program in the state at that time. As fate would have it, she met her husband Tom there and together they wound up in Vermont in 1986. They arrived with about \$300 and no firm jobs yet, but did find a small apartment in Pittsfield. After a few weeks of housekeeping at a local hotel, Kathy knew she would never do that



KATHY

again. "People are terrible," she said, and so she sent letters to the consulting foresters around the state.

As luck would have it, Kathy was offered a job in her county, where her job interview was a day of marking timber. She has spent the ensuing four decades working as a consulting forester with private landowners. You might think that Kathy has a distinct advantage in woodland ownership and forest management since she's a licensed forester — and you'd be partly right. She will readily admit that it gives her knowledge but "that doesn't mean

that it isn't hard work. Knowledge doesn't get the work done!" And, Kathy has done a lot of work on the 10-acre woodland that she and Tom purchased in 1987, and where they built their home.

A big part of the attraction for this parcel was the view, good enough to make the new landowners overlook issues with the class 4 road that barely had a culvert. The road had also been a "party road" and Kathy recalls that it took "years to pick up all the beer cans and bottles that had been discarded on the property." Not only that, the land was transitioning from pasture to forest and covered in buckthorn. She and Tom had to cut buckthorn before they could even blast a hole in the ground for the house.

But there were also big, big 250 year old sugar maples scattered around the property, "the grandpappies" of what grows today. There was also ash and pockets of paper birch that grew quickly, in fact enough paper birch that Kathy and Tom dug and sold saplings. Kathy and Tom managed this land together for thirty years, creating garden space, building a playhouse cabin for the kids, making trails, and cutting trees as needed. Today, Kathy is the sole land manager, joining that growing group, widowed woodland owners, after Tom's passing in 2019.

Foresters often ask landowners what their vision for their property is, so it might be assumed that foresters who are also landowners would begin their ownership with a vision. But that was not the case. Since the land was still transitioning from pasture to forest, Kathy and Tom waited to see what came in, what chose to grow, and what it was going to turn into. In the meantime, they did put trails in, and they began to have ideas of what they wanted to do, "but then we had kids." And now everything has changed. The view that they bought the property for is gone, and a young forest stands in its place. But, alas, introduced species are persistent. Kathy still invests an enormous amount of energy dealing with the buckthorn that remains a problem, along with other species that have joined the mix.

What is really important to Kathy now that everything has changed, "is just having a place that's my own, that I can take care of; that I want to take care of. I still love the view. There's still a view, it's just not what it was." She also loves sitting on the screened-in porch listening to the woods at night in the summer, and watching storms come in. And, there are special places, now that time has passed. "There's a big maple that died a long time ago at the bottom of the hill, and it's just decaying in place. From some points on the trail, you can actually see right through the middle of it. It's a neat spot." So neat in fact, that she used the tractor to move some stones to make a stone bench there. Then there is the little cabin she and Tom built with the kids. It's falling apart now, but she'd like to fix it up for the grandkids. "Really I think the whole place is special." That is why Kathy finds it so extremely frustrating to work hard at something, one specific task, that can get derailed because the roadside

mower ignored her signs requesting no mowing to minimize spread of parsnip, which was almost eliminated. "So next year it's going to be parsnip. I guarantee you it will," she laments.

She and Tom took care of the property together but Tom did all the work that involved the tractor and other heavy equipment. So the transition, even though she is a forester, was very difficult. He did all the mowing and Kathy had never even driven the tractor before he died. "He gave me a lesson when he was sick. It took a lot for me to feel comfortable, confident enough to feel like I could just do what I needed to and not feel like I was making things worse. Because I'm sure I did that a lot." She had to find out what worked for her property maintenance-wise. "Tom mowed everything he could.



Kathy's family sitting on rocks.

I do not do that. I did it the first summer and then I thought, 'I am not doing that again.'" Another thing she has chosen not to do that Tom did is cut trees down. "I don't have a desire to do that. I've done it. Don't care. It's hard. If it goes the wrong way, then you have a mess. And I just don't even want to think about that. I don't mind cutting it when it's on the ground, but I don't want to take trees down anymore." So she relies on her son-in-law, or for jobs that are beyond his skill set, she calls in a professional logger. Also, she promised her children she wouldn't be running a chainsaw when no one was around. And most times, no one is around.

Then there's the learning curve about what to do when. Like when to put chains on the tractor for the winter. Not to mention handling equipment maintenance. Kathy says she's fairly knowledgeable and can usually come close to figuring out what is wrong or broken. "But just because I have knowledge about what's wrong doesn't mean I want to fix it. And some of it is just too heavy. Like taking the mower deck off. I can't do that, there is no way I can do that." To get things fixed, she relies on a 'neighborhood network' which she has had to develop because Tom did all the repair work too. "I have some farmer friends down in Clarendon who I send pictures of

whatever broke. I say look, this happened. They go, 'Okay, I can come up on Monday.'"

Kathy's favorite tool is her tractor with the backhoe attached. She finds she can handle almost anything between the two. "Today, there was this wad of vines that I didn't want to cut through. So I turned the tractor around, unhooked everything, and just dug it out. So there!" As far as hand tools go, she says her favorite is her mini chainsaw. "Because when you can't get it with a pair of loppers, it's nice to be able to just cut it off."

As far as the challenges Kathy faces in taking care of her woodland, there are the previously mentioned introduced species. It's not only the constant battle of keeping them under control, but also the challenge of the pure physicality of the work. She had been in the woods pulling grape vine and oriental bittersweet on this particular day. "It needs to be done so you just do it but it's exhausting. Tomorrow morning I'll be slow to wake up and move because pulling grapevines and bittersweet from trees is hard, just very hard." A personal challenge she faces is trying to enjoy the woods without working in them. She likes to listen to the birds and loves doing photography but admits that it's easy to get distracted when she notices something that needs to be

done. "It's hard for me to walk by something and not want to do it, not want to take care of it right away."

When talking about her successes on the property, Kathy immediately refers to all the work she's done controlling introduced species. She talks about how, even though her property may be surrounded by these species, controlling them on her property makes it more special to her. She also mentioned the success she's been having in restoring native woodland plants in one place on her property. The project began when she noticed leeks had sprouted in an area where there had been a tiny marble quarry excavation. She decided she would clean the site up and move her May apples down there and some blood root. "And there's trillium there. I started moving all these other plants down there so it's really cool. I think the fun part is seeing all those plants slowly come back; because it was pasture, it takes a long time sometimes for those plants to re-establish."

Kathy doesn't have a written management plan guiding all her work, per se, because it is such a young forest but she does have a map, and guidelines in her head. She also has a running plant list and wants to start a bird list. Her biggest fear for the property is that in some parts of her ten acres the trees are 90% ash. "And it's going to be gone. Then I'm starting the buckthorn world all over again. That's why I'm so adamant about killing this stuff." She jokes that if the buckthorn resurgence happens that is when she is going to move away. When asked if her future really would include a move away from the property, Kathy said it depends. "If my daughter and son-in-law come back to Vermont, I'll probably stay. But if they don't I won't. I want to have a support system you know. Not that I don't have friends, but

it's not the same [as family]."

Often, female landowners find that they like working with female foresters; they feel that they are heard, that their concerns are more validated. Kathy has seen this world from a different perspective as a female forester in a male-dominated profession. From Kathy's early forestry education until today, female foresters are still in the minority. And in her early career with the Maryland Forest Service, she felt that the female foresters and technicians were always "being tested." It wasn't overt, and nobody would have admitted to it. But, the females did more work, wrote more plans, enrolled more Tree Farms because they had to! Females had to outperform everyone to gain even a little recognition. It's not the same today. Kathy is respected by her colleagues for the work she does with landowners and in the woods. Though she does note "some landowners find it easier - both men and women - to work with a forester of their own gender."

Even professionals need help sometimes, and Kathy has a mix of on-line and individuals she turns to when she's looking for resources or help. "I have the crew of people that work the Rutland Fair forestry building, on the Fair committee. Those are people I can turn to for anything. I could say, Lisa and Shane, could you come help me do this? And they would be there in a heartbeat, you know. And I've joined Facebook groups just to get information, whether it's a native plant group or birding ones, they're fun." She spoke about how when she was a young professional the resources just weren't there the way they are today. "I think now there are more places for women to be able to reach out and get help and get guidance and advice. There's so much available

now. I think women are more apt to reach out because it's there."

As for advice to other women woodland owners that could make their journey easier, Kathy says she's not sure any of it is easy, but the basics are if you buy woodland, hire a forester and get advice. She recommends taking as much advice as you can get. "That's really it. Expect there to be a lot of hurdles, but if you have an opportunity to buy land, buy more." Kathy wishes she had a hundred acres and could sell timber. She actually has two veneer cherry trees on her ten acres, just growing straight, clean, clear, and tall. "Just gorgeous," she says. The kids are under strict orders to guard those trees. "Do not even breathe on them!" she says with a laugh. "If you have a chance to own woodlands and to take care of it, it's a feeling like no other, being a land steward."