# THE COON CREEK EXPERIMENT

## an innovative approach to tree farming

Smack in the middle of a thriving 160-acre grain farm in Marengo, Ill., stand 1500 fine specimen trees. The trees, honey locust, emerald queen maple, Rosehill ash, Greenspire Linden and sovereign pin oak, are at a sturdy three to three and a half inches in diameter, but they aren't for sale.

"We're letting them grow another year or so to add an inch to inch and a half to their diameters and a whopping 100 percent to their value," smiles John Banghart, the innovative owner of the property and originator of the farm within a farm concept.

John's brainchild began a little over three years ago when he, businessman Glenn Adams and Glenn's son, Jeff, were looking for a profitable way to provide young Jeff with a constructive learning experience in the nursery business.

"At that time I had just sold my sod farm business and was planning to concentrate on developing my Marengo property," recalls John. "I realized I had available property and equipment, Glenn would invest the necessary capital if there were a sound business proposal, and young Jeff would provide the labor. All we were really missing was an experienced nurseryman." It was then they convinced 20-year veteran nurseryman Carl Wilson to be the fourth partner. The four had no trouble agreeing on a project. It would be a tree farm. But insuring a profit took a little more ingenuity.

"We knew there was a growing market for larger trees that just wasn't being supplied," says John. Landscape contractors on bigger jobs — institutions, golf courses, schools, parks — want larger trees immediately. They don't want to have to wait a couple of years while they grow." So the project was finalized. Coon Creek trees would only be sold when they reached four to five inches in diameter.

In early spring of 1973, under Carl's supervision, Coon Creek purchased 1500 ¾-inch diameter branch liners for a capital investment of $20,000. In April they were pruned then planted with the help of an 18-inch auger. The trees were planted 12 feet apart in rows of 50 with the rows 15 feet apart. "We needed the space for harvesting," explains John. It will be done under Carl's direction by hand with the help of a trencher. This means each tree will need a five foot square dug around it."

*Honey locust, emerald queen maple, Rosehill ash, Greenspire Linden and sovereign pin oak grace ten acres of the 160-acre farm.*

Each September the trees are fertilized with a 6-24-24 low nitrogen mix. "We're careful not to over fertilize because we don't want to force growth. This causes bark splitting," John explains. In late February they are sprayed with a dormant oil, and in June with a foliar spray. Trimming is done as needed back to the lateral branches and the trees are continuously straightened.

If harvested at two to three inches, according to John, the $20,000 original investment would gross $112,500 or $75 a tree. If harvested at four to five inches in diameter, he says, the gross will be in excess of $225,000.

Why is such a simple idea as letting the trees grow an extra year or two to double the profit so in-

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novative? "Because," says John, "most people just aren't set up to go five to six years without any income. Your land is tied up, you must have use of and maintain your equipment and labor is usually a factor." Nevertheless, John believes many more people in similar circumstances could adopt the Coon Creek concept and make a considerable profit.

John calls the Coon Creek experiment Phase I. Phase II, the planting of 20 acres on a nearby farm, has begun with 500 specimen branch liners already in place. Jeff is the only Coon Creek partner in the new enterprise.

Although young Jeff is only in his third semester of his nursery education, it appears he's headed for a magna cum laude degree in tree farming, and Carl, Glenn and John are headed straight for the bank.□