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Retiree finds green thumb as a farmer of area trees

By **JIMMY SETTLE**
 The Leaf-Chronicle

JOELTON — In Kenneth Tidwell's world, Scotch pines and Colorado blue spruces live in perfect harmony with ash, oak, Tennessee's state tree the tulip poplar and even the prehistoric dawn redwood.

The retired and distinguished educator who resides near the state line in Oak Grove, Ky., has moved his classroom outdoors to a 37-acre tree farm he owns in this area of extreme northern Davidson County. In so doing, he has earned statewide acclaim for his commitment to tree conservation.

Tidwell, a charter member and director of the Montgomery County Forestry Association, was named a runner-up for the title of Best Tree Farmer of the Year in Tennessee for 2004.

But his real reward is escaping to the tapestry of flora and fauna in northern Middle Tennessee.

"This is a pretty good way to retire," Tidwell said, surveying the gently rolling



Jimmy Settle/The Leaf-Chronicle Jimmy Settle/The

Kenneth Tidwell, left, and his assistant, Ron Churchill of Clarksville, talk trees at the entrance gate to the 37-acre tree farm in Joelton. The two have formed a friendship through their preservation efforts. Award-winning tree farmer Kenneth Tidwell of Oak Grove, Ky., examines one of the dawn redwood trees on his Joelton farm. This particular species is often called the "dinosaur tree" because it has survived for 20 million years. It is a fast-growing variety.

landscape with row upon row of young hardwoods and evergreens, backed by a rich canvas of taller hardwoods displaying the yellow, orange and red colors of fall.

Tidwell even has his own treehouse of sorts — an upscale version of what many of us played in as children.

"Where I was raised, which was close to here, there were trees all around. I've just thought several times, 'What would the world be like if I looked outside and there weren't any trees?' I've just had a love for trees, and I used to take for granted that everybody knew an oak tree or a poplar when they saw it," he said.



His interest in tree farming was supported by Mike Huddleston with the state Division of Forestry, Clarksville city forester Gary Tuttle and the Montgomery County Master Gardeners Association.

"I just said one day, 'I've got the land, and the time ... I can't think of a better thing to do in retirement.'"

Natural education

Always the teacher, Tidwell thinks the importance of trees and the natural order of the universe are among the most important lessons children can learn. Holding bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees from Austin Peay State University and George Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, he is a voracious reader about all matters of the forest.

"What we demonstrate with this tree farm is that most forests are mixed, and the species are very diverse. This is what we want, not clear-cutting and planting only one type of tree across the landscape like you see some companies doing.

"I spent several years teaching, and it really burns me up when sixth- or seventh-graders can recite the names of all of the dinosaurs, but they don't know the difference between a dogwood, redbud or oak tree," Tidwell said.

Aided by Clarksvillian Ron Churchill in nurturing the Joelton tree farm, Tidwell launched the planned effort in 1999.

"There are several goals that tree farmers try to attain," he said. "One, is that we try to conserve water, and I've built two spring-fed lakes here.

"We're also looking out for wildlife, and on this place you'll find everything from wild turkeys to bluebirds, too many deer, frankly, crows, rabbits and squirrels. I've seen a den of red foxes here, and a coyote or two," Tidwell said.

Then, tree farming can promote outdoor recreation. He and Churchill have set up footlogs across the creek that runs through the farm, and over time, they'll likely have a path cut over the entire area to offer opportunities for bicycling and

hiking.

"And then, we're producing wood on a tree farm. We're trying to raise real timber, and at the same time, be good stewards of the land. We replenish and sustain the forest by selectively cutting trees that are appropriate," he said.

Native selections

Tidwell's forest includes, among other components, some 2,000 Shumard oaks and many other Eastern hardwoods and evergreens. "I picked trees that are native to this area, just because they can do better. You'll see a lot of yellow poplar, oak, sweet gum, hickory and cherry, and I like cedars because they are a pretty, native evergreen that thrives in this part of Tennessee," he said.

Among the most interesting of all trees on his farm are the four dawn redwoods, also known as the "dinosaur tree" because the species has survived for more than 20 million years. It's a deciduous tree that looks like a sequoia or coastal redwood. Its soft, bright-green needles turn copper-colored in the fall.

"I really recommend that tree, because as far as I can tell, it's not susceptible to any diseases, and that's very rare," he said.

Tidwell is also comforted in knowing that his award-winning tree farm is helping to secure the future of forestry in this area.

"These trees will go on forever, because when the ones you see here are gone, their seeds will produce others."

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