

Expanding Business Opportunities for the Green Industry in Backyard Woodlots

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The bread and butter of the landscape industry revolves around providing services to clients for everything from turf, trees, gardens, special plantings and structures, and other elements. A growing interest in natural landscaping and woodland health is creating niche market opportunities. The Uni-

versity Extension organizations in Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania have been using “The Woods In Your Backyard” program to educate small acreage owners about the creation and enhancement of natural areas on their property since 2006. Surveys and frequent inquiries reveal that small-acreage owners are seeking service providers to offer services related to establishment and management of natural areas. This kind of business has been referred to as “Land Care,” which is the term that will be used in the remainder of this article as we explore the opportunities and resources of potential interest to green industry business owners.

Expanding a forested area into a lawn using planted tree seedlings with tree shelters to protect from deer browsing. Many years of maintenance are required.



Small-Acreage Landowners Increasing

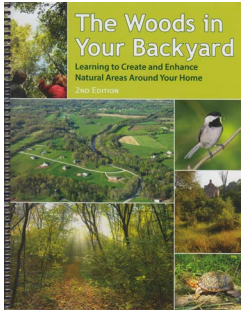
Demographic and landscape changes have created this opportunity. Rapid development in many areas of the Mid-Atlantic has resulted in the subdivision of farms and woodlands into small acreage/large lot subdivisions. Homeowners who purchase these properties often have questions, however. If I have acres of grass to mow and want to reduce that, what are lower maintenance (but still appealing) options? If I plant trees, what kind should I plant, and how do I protect them from deer browsing?

If the property already has woods, the question may be what should I do to maintain or even improve the woodlands health? What can I do to help wildlife or discourage nuisance wildlife? How does one create a trail, control invasive species, manage vines, decide what trees to cut for firewood, etc.

While answers and sources of assistance for these questions on larger acreages are generally easily accessed, the same is not true for smaller acreages that fall between large acreage and house-lot size properties. We believe that professionals already working “in the neighborhood” in rural subdivisions represent the best opportunity to both meet the needs and profit from it. While

most landscapers and arborists have not offered services “beyond the yard,” various land care practices might be easily integrated into an existing suite of services you offer. Land care services target creation or enhancement of natural areas.

The Woods In Your Backyard: Helping Landowners



“The Woods in Your Backyard” program has reached thousands of small-acreage landowners through workshops, webinars, and online classes. The self-assessment guide and workbook *The Woods in Your Backyard: Learning to Create and Enhance Natural Areas Around Your Home*, has sold over 14,000 copies and is designed for owners of 1 to 9 acres of land with no existing knowledge of forestry or wildlife.

The guide uses lessons, followed by outdoor investigative activities. A

case study is used to help the landowner identify his or her interests in the land, draw a map, inventory the property, apply ecological principles, and put knowledge into practice. The manual also provides a primer on how to identify different species of trees and how to deal with invasive species and wildlife damage. A downloadable self-guided workbook facilitates property assessment, goals articulation, and plan development. While developed primarily for landowners, it is also useful as a reference and process tool for small-acreage service providers.

Opportunities for Arborists and Landscapers

Learning to sell and apply land care for natural areas establishment and maintenance may present new income opportunities. A survey of online class participants found that 42% had contacted a service provider after taking the class. Of those, 54% contacted someone in the green industry. Another 31% contacted professionals who focus on invasive plant management and/or professionals in public service.

These same participants were asked about land care practices they have or would do themselves versus practices they would pay for. Not surprisingly, the types of things folks want to hire out often require special skills, knowledge, and/or equipment. Among the most commonly listed projects they would pay for were tree and shrub planting, using herbicides to control invasive plants, and habitat enhancement.

To meet these interests, there are a variety of land care practices you might consider offering, such as: 1) preparing and planting an existing lawn area with trees; 2) controlling vines; 3) controlling invasive plants; 4) designing and creating trails; 5) creating and maintaining tall grass meadows; 6) developing edge habitat and brush piles; 7) felling trees for firewood; and 8) establishing wildlife food plots.

The big question is *are landowners willing to pay for services?* Our experience and research suggest there is an unmet demand for service providers, and informal interviews with the few who are doing this indicate it can be profitable. Other considerations of “does this make business sense” should include seasonality and marketing value. Many of the land care practices, such as invasive control, trail development, and tree planting, can be done in the dormant months when work for landscapers is lacking. The ability to talk with your clients about natural areas may be a cue to some of your environmental stewardship and give you the edge over a competitor.

Educating clients that “messy” is good for wildlife is a challenge. The manual can help.



Continued on page 18

Green Industry Training Program Coming Soon!

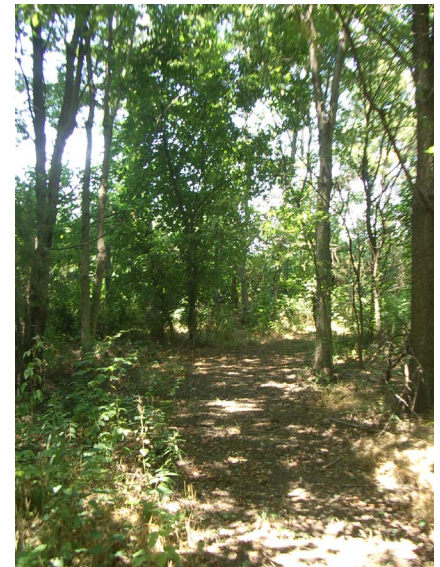
The University of Maryland Extension, in partnership with other organizations, is developing two publications: 1) a woodland health checklist that Woodland Health Professionals (WHPs) can use with clients to help them identify land care practices for their property; and, 2) a *Land Care Practices Handbook* that will be used for green industry trainings.

The hands-on workshops will demonstrate how to use a woodland health checklist and how to implement land care practices, many of which rely upon the use of forestry tools and techniques scaled down for smaller properties. The training will help participants learn some of the techniques and knowledge needed to get a Category 2 Commercial Pesticide Applicators license for use in forestry applications. International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) credits will be available.

If you want to be notified of available training opportunities or learn more, contact Jonathan Kays, Forestry Specialist, University of Maryland Extension, at (301) 432-2767 x323 or jkays@umd.edu, or Adam Downing, Extension Forestry Agent, Virginia Cooperative Extension, at (540) 948-6881 or adowning@vt.edu



Controlling invasive plants and vines using herbicides with proper PPE (personal protection equipment) can be effective on smaller properties.



This maintained trail in a 2-acre backyard woods can provide sanctuary and recreational enjoyment. Trail creation for clients allows them to access their woods.

Landscape Specification Guidelines ^{6th edition}



- Part 1: Exterior Landscape Installation
- Part 2: Exterior Landscape Maintenance
- Part 3: Interior Landscape Installation and Maintenance
- Part 4: Irrigation
- Part 5: Non-Tidal Wetland Planting
- Part 6: Seeding and Sodding
- Part 7: Soils
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