

HOT

Branching out: Arboretum's community forest continues to grow

By TABITHA REEVES The Winchester Star
Apr 25, 2025

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Susan Hill of Front Royal (front left) and Nancy Sabella of Strasburg (front right) were among the 14 volunteers plant trees in the Community Forest on Arbor Day at Blandy Experimental Farm near Boyce on Friday.

Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star

BOYCE — Blandy Experimental Farm's community forest began as just a cluster of saplings, mere sticks poking above the ground. But now, as it continues to expand, the oldest portions of the 15-year-old project look like a true forest, with hundreds of oak, persimmon, redbud, pine and hazelnut trees rising from a grassy field.

For T'ai Roulston, the curator of the State Arboretum of Virginia at Blandy, watching the plantings change from twigs to timbers has been amazing. Standing in the newest part of the patch on Friday morning, surrounded by hip-high cages protecting tree sprouts, Roulston recalled the moment he first realized that the community forest was truly becoming a forest.

"It was magical, being in there and suddenly I felt like, 'Wow,'" Roulston said. "This was just so great to have seen this really turn into a forest."

Friday was Arbor Day, a national holiday dedicated to planting, protecting and promoting trees.

In Clarke County, a collection of Blandy staff members and more than a dozen local volunteers celebrated Arbor Day in a fitting fashion by adding 100 young native trees to the community forest, which now has nearly 600 plantings total.

The grove can be found just within the entrance to Blandy off U.S. 50. It sprawls across a hill to the left of the winding main road, with a smaller portion of the forest on the right side of the road, too. The taller, older part is closest to the main entrance and the trees become smaller the farther you go.

It is within the 700-acre Blandy Experimental Farm, but outside of the technical bounds of the arboretum's 180 acres that lie in the center of the farm, explained Roulston. However, the trees in the community forest are included in the arboretum's grand total count of 6,600 trees, according to Roulston.

"It really got its start because we wanted to increase the amount of forest here that was just grass," said Roulston. "There wasn't much value for habitat. ... We wanted to slowly turn it into a forest and then thought, 'Well, what would be a better way to do it than just have regular, periodic plantings and do it over time?'"

And the idea took off. The community has been involved and engaged, with school groups, organizations and individuals trekking out to Blandy to contribute labor to the project whenever a planting was advertised, said Roulston.

"It's fantastic," he said. "I mean, you feel so much support from the community, how much they like being part of things and how much they appreciate the Arboretum here. ... People really come to you and volunteer their labor and give the best of themselves."

One of those people on Friday was Ali Fogle of Front Royal, a frequent visitor to Blandy for its walking paths and nature. She gained her inspiration for tree planting from Jane Goodall, a well-known conservation advocate and chimpanzee researcher. With Goodall on the brain, Fogle saw Blandy's posting that called for volunteers and couldn't miss out.

"It's just satisfying and very therapeutic to come out and plant trees and do your part for the Earth," Fogle said, pausing from her work.

Katie Enders of Winchester, a volunteer, tended to agree. Volunteerism is good, she said, but when you're working outside on a nice spring day, you can gain some personal benefit, too, she said. She made friends, gained some morning sunshine and contributed to a good cause.

"Doing work for the earth needs to be celebrated more," Fogle said..

"Not just one week a year," Enders chimed in, referring to last week, which held both Arbor Day and Earth Day.

Both volunteers expressed excitement to be able to return in a few years' time to see the hazelnut trees producing nuts and the tree growth overall.

This is the first time the community forest has had a mass tree planting on Arbor Day specifically, as many past ones have been single tree planting. But Roulston indicated that he hopes to make it a tradition for years to come, pushing forward the work that he helped launch 15 years ago.

"It feels really great to see the support for it and to see it change over time," Roulston said. "You don't often really get to feel that with planting trees — that you really created the habitat that you envisioned — unless you stay around the same place long enough to see it happen."

Learn more about Blandy Experimental Farm and the State Arboretum of Virginia at blandy.virginia.edu.

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