



Les Barden: WORKING THE WOODS

Les Barden loves to work in the woods. Always has. “I got my first job when I was eight and haven’t been out of work since,” says the 75-year-old woodsman, who still puts in 10-hour days on his 200-acre Rochester property.

Every morning begins the same way - he heads for the barn, where he harnesses his team, Star and Diamond. The powerful Percherons are built to work, and they pull hard, responding to Barden’s expert handling, straining to earn their keep.

Barden has always worked with animals, first oxen, then horses. “They’re gentle on the woods,” he says. Which is what he’s after. This is a man who takes pride in his work, in doing things right. Watch the way he handles his horses. Or take a look at his precisely stacked woodpile. Or the neat house and barn, plus the outbuildings - all built from timber he took off his land. The forest itself, though, is his most eloquent accomplishment.

“I’ve brought hundreds of people up there over the years on forestry tours showing off his good work,” says UNH Cooperative Extension forester Don Black, who’s worked with Barden for three decades.

Since he began cultivating what he calls his “garden of trees,” 40 years ago, Barden has been making constant improvements on his land, some of which have been supported by the Stewardship Incentive Program’s cost-sharing program. “This is our latest project - soil erosion control,” he says, pointing out a newly repaired stretch of woods road. “Water from the hillside made it icy or muddy,” he says, “making it difficult for the horses to get over.”

At another bend in the road, he points to a small stand of pines. The understory is dark and shadowy, tangled with growth. “See that?” he says. “The whole forest used to look that way before I started working on it.” Everyone who visits the Barden Tree Farm takes one look at that patch of trees, left standing as a demonstration site, and understands, in an instant, how careful management improves a forest. The rest of the woods is open and light, filled with towering, well-spaced trees, like columns in a massive outdoor cathedral.

“The cost-sharing program inspires people to do improvement work on their woodlots, things they wouldn’t do on their own,” says Black. “It’s an absolute catalyst for forest activity.” Black sees access roads as the single most important improvement a landowner can undertake. “They make it possible for people to get out on their land,” says Black. “They create recreation opportunities.” For Les Barden, woods roads brought



Les and Star taking a well-deserved break from caring for the land.



Don Black and Les Barden admire the young white pine trees tended by Les.

in new business and a chance to demonstrate his life's work. "He's been a tremendous spokesperson for a well-managed forest," says Black.

At the end of another day, Barden stands in the open doorway of his barn, the horses shifting in their stalls behind him. He points across the barnyard to the pine forest that stretches away in front of him. The mature trees are growing straight and true, hundreds and hundreds of them. "See, that's ideal," he says. But he is not admiring the lofty giants. He is studying the understory. "Look how the young growth is coming up underneath." He's at it again - studying his forest, planning ahead. Envisioning the future.



Cathedral white pines thinned to encourage the growth of young trees.

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