

RDS FOREST AND WOODLAND AWARDS

Recognising excellence in forestry

The prestigious RDS Forest and Woodland Awards competition celebrates its 30-year anniversary this year, roughly the lifetime of a commercial conifer crop

Liam Kelly

Teagasc Forestry Development Officer, Mullingar

The RDS has been involved in forestry since the 1740s with many of Ireland's oldest remaining forests originally planted with the support of RDS grants (or premiums, as they were known). The Forest and Woodland Awards continue the RDS tradition of involvement in forestry. The aim is to highlight excellence in forest management by forest owners and showcasing what they are able to accomplish through the application of best practice and innovative management techniques.

As farm forestry in Ireland has developed, so too has the scope of the competition with the addition of new award categories. This year the prize fund extends to €15,000, with category winners receiving cash prizes along with the RDS silver medal and perpetual trophy, while category runners-up receive smaller cash prizes and a certificate of merit.

The award categories for 2017 are:

- **Production forestry:** divided into two sections: less than 15ha and over 15ha and is open to forest owners employing good silvicultural management on their farms.

- **Multipurpose forestry:** open to individuals and organisations that are expanding or developing existing or

new forest habitats through natural and environmentally sensitive means.

- **Community woodlands:** designed to inspire and reward projects involving community woodlands and forests established and managed in a sustainable way that benefits the landscape, the local people, biodiversity and the economy.

- **Teagasc Farm Forestry Award:** a new award for 2017, sponsored by Teagasc to promote the sustainable use of land that integrates farming and forestry. It aims to promote the positive contribution that forestry can bring to traditional farming practices and also to increase the number of trees that are being planted to help mitigate agricultural greenhouse gas emissions.

Midland winners

Over the years, the midland counties have produced several RDS Forestry Award winners. Some of these award winning forest owners are highlighted below:

Bill and Pat Connell

Collinstown, Co Westmeath
2016 production forest winner
(over 15ha)

Bill Connell and his family planted 40ha of mainly broadleaves in 1995/1996. The species mix includes 16ha of sycamore (with some cherry), 9ha of ash, 10ha of oak and 5ha of Norway spruce. The ash was initially line thinned (one in seven) in 2009 and received a full thinning in 2013. With the abundance of timber, Bill invested in equipment to set up a fire-wood business, with his son Pat.

Bill is a founding member and a former chair of the Westmeath Farm Forestry Group. The group facilitates peer-to-peer learning and the sharing of forestry knowledge among growers in the county and between other forest owner groups.

Bill experienced difficulties extracting timber from his broadleaf woodland situated on relatively hilly land,



so he set about developing a suitable forwarder with a local machinery manufacturer. Other local growers came on board and along with some funding from Westmeath Leader Development Company; they were able to develop the first "Falcon forwarder". This has been a tremendous help locally with timber extraction.

All Bill's broadleaves have now been thinned at least once, with the oak completed in 2016. Access routes and tracks have been upgraded as part of the thinning strategy. Most of the work was carried out by Bill's son Pat along with many other trained chainsaw operators and foresters. The woodland is looking very impressive now and the benefits of his management interventions are obvious to all.

Future management will involve developing a thinning rotation across the site, encouraging a continuous cover approach and developing the recreational aspect of the woodland. Teagasc and the local forest owner group have held a number of walks on this site to date.

The Westmeath forest owner group visiting the award-winning site in 2016.



Of the RDS Awards, Bill says: "The scheme is exquisite and it is an honour to be recognised for the forest work that we have done. The RDS Awards command respect and the fact that it has been awarded by your forestry peers is very encouraging. It is also great to receive the financial award."

Pat Lynch

Delvin, Co Westmeath, winner, 2003
Pat Lynch says: "I was delighted to win the competition and its awards. Good species selection to match the site, along with proper early management, ensured a quality plantation was established.

"Winning the competition encouraged my interest in the future management of my crop, ensuring that it achieves its potential."

James Bennett

Mountrath, Co Laois, winner, 2006
James Bennett feels that the competition is very important from an educational point of view. "It makes

you assess what you are doing and why. It therefore focuses your attention on the quality of your own forest management. Preparing a good application form based on your own woodland management and highlighting what you do to the judges is important," he says.

Colm Foy

Co Longford, winner, 2012

"In the beginning, I was drawn to forestry farming as a financial venture. Over time as my farm continues to evolve, I realise that this progressive method of farming allows me to combine my business skills with the traditional farming skills I had already. I've been able to create a fulfilling successful career that I enjoy. Winning the RDS award in 2012 was just the icing on the cake."

Ivor Clegg

Mountrath, Co Laois, winner, 2014
Ivor Clegg has a hands-on approach when it comes to managing his woodlands. Of the competition, he says:

"It was great to be recognised for my forest management work. The anticipation of entering and wonderment at how I would do was thrilling. After winning, I am precluded from entering again for five years, but I hope to re-enter in 2019. The competition in itself is self-discipline has a great influence on current decisions that I make in managing my forest."

Testimonies

Based on the above testimonies, it is clear that forest owners who engage directly in the management of their forests and incorporate them into their overall farm business get financial reward, personal satisfaction and enjoyment out of it.

This year's competition is closed and judging is currently under way but forest owners not involved can consider an application for next year. The more innovative the better – virtually every farm in Ireland has at least a few acres whose optimum use could well be forestry. The competition will open next spring.