

Plant trees to help reduce your stress

Forestry can complement farm enterprises and provide many benefits including better work-life balance

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Psychologists report that looking at trees and greenery generally is good for your health. Integrating trees into your mix of farm enterprises can also enhance your well-being. Westmeath farmer Gerard Deegan says planting part of his Mullingar farm has fitted in neatly with his farm enterprises and reduced his day-to-day stress.

“Since planting trees, I feel my workload is more manageable and I can now fully appreciate and enjoy what my farm has to offer,” says Gerard. “For the first time in my life, I feel that I am in charge of my time.”

Traditional farm enterprises are demanding in terms of time and labour input, especially if you aim to make a half-decent profit. This is particularly true if you are responsible for the management and welfare of livestock. Gerard is one of a growing number of landowners who have not only considered their enterprise options but have also taken proactive decisions to improve their lifestyle.

Each landowner who plants trees usually identifies a number of reasons for doing so. While the financial benefits can be highly attractive, another reason is the improved labour situation – more quality time is freed-



Gerard Deegan on one of the many access paths through the forest (taken within the beech plot).

Key messages

According to the 2017 DAFM Forest Service statistics for Ireland between 1980 and 2016:

- 286,479ha of private woodland was established,
- 83% of this area was developed by farmers.
- 21,994 private forest owners have received grant aid to establish forests.

up to develop the farm (and forest) and also to pursue other hobbies and interests.

Gerard Deegan has 145 acres of good-quality land in Cooksborough, Co Westmeath. Up to 2012, Gerard was an organic dairy farmer, milking 35 cows and supplying Glenisk Dairies, while also managing a calf-to-beef system. Gerard developed an interest in different poultry species which he also raised organically.

As the years passed, Gerard found his main farming enterprise to be getting more stressful. After considering many different options including land leasing, Gerard decided he would plant up to 75% of his farm in trees and continue to farm the rest.

“Forestry was a good option as I could still draw Basic Payment entitlements on the planted land,” says Gerard. “The forest premium is available for 20 years and as I was in

REPS at the time, the FEPS scheme appealed to me.”

In 2012, Gerard planted 43ha (107 acres) of mixed woodland under FEPS. Gerard said: “This scheme suited me from an environmental point of view as I was an organic farmer. Working with my forester, I was able to plan and organise the layout of the forest.

“This included the species composition plus also the access paths that were installed at the time of planting. I deer-fenced at the time of establishment due to the threat from the locally increasing deer population.”

Gerard planted approximately 20ha with conifers mainly Norway spruce plus some Scot’s pine and European larch. The conifer species were to provide an early timber return. He also planted over 20ha in broadleaves, predominately ash, plus oak, beech and sycamore.

The species were planted in blocks, and each is easily accessible via the access paths that were installed at planting. The tracks and field headlands are fully maintained by topping two to three times a year to ensure ease of access at all times.

Gerard also opted to plant a number of specimen trees sporadically along the various paths, with additional samples added each year to ensure further diversity. Even though the site was managed by his forestry company, Gerard also carries out some maintenance. This has safeguarded not only full stocking across the site, but also ensured that the crop has developed uniformly.

During winter 2017/18, for example, Gerard walked each line of broadleaves and shaped each tree while also removing the odd large side branch to facilitate future shaping. The development of the site has been phenom-

enal, with spectacular height growth across all species on site, which surprises me every time I visit.

“In 2012, when I planted the forest I got out of milking altogether,” says Gerard. “I still farm 14ha where I keep an organic suckler herd, with a calf-to-beef enterprise. I have also more than doubled the number of poultry (including hens, broilers, geese, turkeys and ducks) which I rear organically in the farmyard along with some pigs. These are for our own use and for selling locally. I really enjoy keeping up with some farming.”

Gerard has also recently become involved with Social Farming Ireland, which has allowed him to develop his love for helping people and their needs. He says: “The benefits that people with special needs gain by partaking in both the farm and forest activities are brilliant for both the

participants and myself.”

In the future, Gerard intends to enhance his existing resource by installing some additional leisure facilities within the woodland. This will include seating plus information stations describing the different species of trees, wildlife and walkways through the wood.

Even though Gerard changed his main enterprise to tree farming, he is as busy as ever, though the work is not as time critical and demanding. “For the first time in my life I feel that I am in charge of my time,” he concludes.

Autumn is a good time to take stock of your farm enterprises. It is also a good time to consider forestry as it allows plenty of lead-in time if considering forestry during the upcoming planting season. For further details contact your local Teagasc forest advisor, at any Teagasc office.