

Our Wildwood Trees

There is an old saying that there are two great times to plant trees: the first was 20 years ago- the other is now. Another old timer saying is when you plant a tree, you plant a legacy.

Trees are one of our most valuable assets at Wildwood for a variety of reasons. They provide valuable windbreaks, wildlife habitat, prevent erosion, and enhance the aesthetic as well as the real monetary value of our homes. For example, when our subdivision was first laid out, generally the well treed lots were surveyed as two acre lots. More moderately treed lots were generally laid out as 2-5 acres and many 10 acre lots have few if any trees on them. This allowed a closer balance in the cost per lot. However, the original higher sales prices and hype favored the more heavily treed lots. Even at the higher sales prices, they generally sold first. This significance has been a part of my personal philosophy. We have planted trees at most of the properties that we have owned over the years, often not seeing the fruits of our labor.

Older growth trees are much more susceptible to insects and disease and subsequent decay than young trees. There needs to be a balanced mixture of very young trees graduating up to the old growth trees for the long term. There appeared to be very few very young natural trees when we bought our property in 1980. Most of the really young trees had been eaten off by rabbits and the 4-5 foot trees had been "ringed" and devastated by porcupines. This had to be corrected and we felt that our property would support many more trees. Consequently, Faye and I embarked early on in planting about 100 to 200 trees every May for many years. We estimate that we have planted approximately 1500 trees on our 12 acres. I had a Wildwood neighbor in those early days who has since sold and moved away. He didn't understand the significance of those attributes, nor agreed with my philosophy. He once chided me about wasting my time and said he had no intention of planting trees for someone else down the road. I can only imagine how much more beautiful and valuable his property would be today, 25 years later, had he invested some money and effort in a planting plan. A neighbor would be enjoying the fruits of his labor today.

There are a number of unique things to consider when developing a tree planting plan at Wildwood. Our area is in a semi-arid climate pocket between two mountain ranges. We receive about 10-12 inches of rainfall a year and a good part of that comes with the monsoons (hopefully) in the late July-August time frame. Some years we are fortunate to get some good June moisture which really helps the trees and wild flower bloom. Occasionally we get a good winter snow accumulation but sometimes we go through four or five year periods of drought.

We could plan our tree planting and survival rate a lot better if we could predict the occurrence of a good year for moisture. That not being the case, we need to consider various alternatives.

Trees are quite sensitive to elevation. This is a very important consideration at our 9200 foot elevation. Notice that trees occur in belts and specific areas. For example junipers and Pinion Pine generally do well at elevations of 6800 feet to 7800 feet. I have 20+ year old cedar trees that are less than two feet high. There is a large stand of Lodge Pole pines at Monarch Pass but I've never been successful with them at Wildwood. Blue Spruce and Aspen will grow at our elevation but need much more water and do better on north facing slopes. Notice the nice stands of Aspen along Superstition Road and east Olympic Circle. The most common native trees in our area are Ponderosa Pine, Douglas Firs, Bristle Cone and Jack Pines. The Bristle Cone pines are exceptionally rugged and drought tolerant. Notice them growing on dry, rocky windswept ridges in the Pike National Forest, all knurled and bent over from the high winds. They grow really good at Wildwood. They grow straight and are quite pretty. They have a lot of rosin on the trunks and needles which deter the porcupines. Also they are not very susceptible to pine beetles. Engelmann Spruce and White Fir are very nice trees that do well at 9200 feet.

It is too high and cold for deciduous trees like cottonwoods, Russian olives and other types that grow like weeds at lower elevations. I've planted chokecherry for wildlife habitat and wind breaks but they seem to die out within a few years. Notice the experimental windbreak plot at the corner of State Highway 24 and Elkhorn Road. We have been watching it for over 20 years and finally a few varieties are getting to beneficial size of three to four feet.

It is generally necessary at Wildwood to supplement seedling pines with water and or increase the retention of what moisture is available. Water supplementation is the most common and understandable method. This is generally dependent on whether an individual property owner has a well, a pump and whether the pump is manual or electric. It is also dependent on the owner's motivation and commitment to the expense and work that is involved. For example, I installed a long handled cast iron pump in 1982. It took 75 pumps to fill a 5 gallon bucket of water. That takes a lot of commitment to pump and pack water to seedling trees. It is especially troubling to see some those seedlings die even after giving them tender loving care. We estimate that about 40% of them have survived.

So you soon find that there are other factors involved as well. For example, we have one friend who early on got water from the caretaker faucet. That water is "soft water" that has been filtered and processed with salt. Every single tree died. Also, that friend like many others at Wildwood, has property with no trees anywhere around. There has to be other reasons why there are no trees on the treeless properties at Wildwood. Some of these factors are:

(1) Protection of the young seedlings from sun and wind. I have numerous old tree stumps left from logging operations many years ago. I have planted many of my trees on the north or northeast side of those old stumps. My reasoning is that if a tree was successful there once, the soil and conditions must be ok. If a stump isn't available, I build up a wind break for the seedling out of branches rocks and other debris. There is no doubt that this is beneficial if not essential. My best success rate is with this method. Without good water though, even that will fail.

(2) Protection from rabbits, porcupines and cattle if your property is not fenced. I quickly learned that lesson and started buying biodegradable plastic tree guards for my seedlings with each of my orders from the Colorado State Forest Nursery. They cost about 30 cents each back then and bamboo stakes were 10 cents. That was more than half the cost of each seedling. Those guards and wooden stakes deteriorate within about 4 or 5 years. I have bought several rolls of chicken wire about 24" high and made cages about 18-24" in diameter using a couple of wooden or metal stakes to hold them in place. This deters the porcupines but is not foolproof. I reuse the cages on newer seedlings when seedlings die.

(3) Polymer. This is a plastic looking material that resembles rice but will absorb moisture and swell to about 10 times the size of the dry grain state. A few tablespoons of polymer around the seedling roots will retain moisture fairly well and definitely helps in our semi-arid environment. It used to cost about \$10 per pound. I believe it is well worth it.

(4) Fertilizer. Evergreens require soil that has a high acidic ph factor. You can purchase a fertilizer tablet to plant with each seedling that is specifically formulated for seedling evergreens. I used to purchase those tablets at 8 cents each.

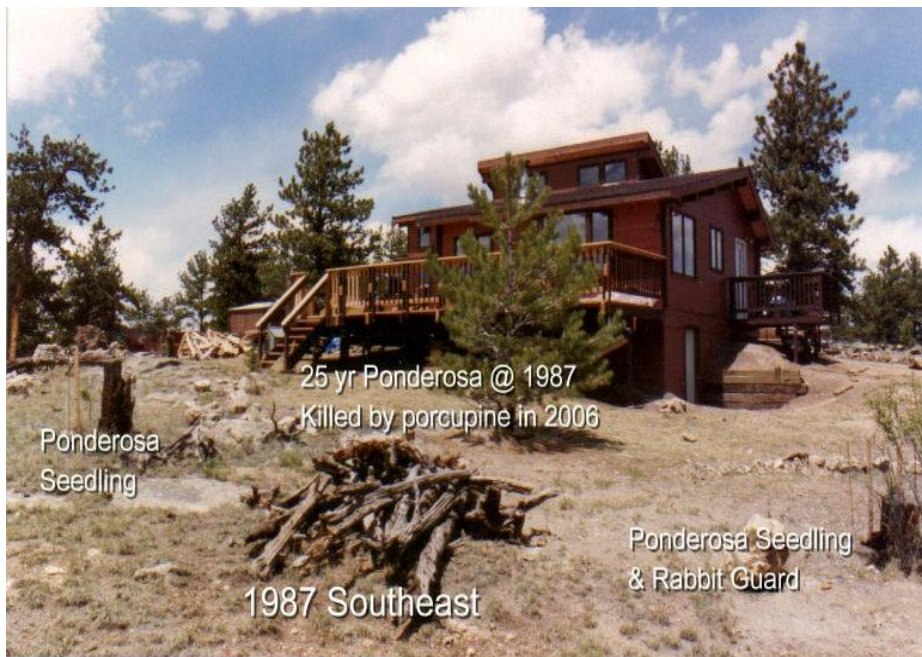
I don't want to leave you with the impression that trees are so hard to grow at Wildwood that it isn't worth it. On the contrary, they are beneficial in so many ways that it is worth it. You just need to recognize our unique Wildwood environment, plant tree types that adapt in that environment and give them some supplemental help to get started.

Our Colorado State Forest Service District Office is in Woodland Park and represents Park County. You can find a gold mine of tree information for our area on their web site at: <http://csfs.colostate.edu/districts/woodlandparkdist.htm>. The seedling tree program is: http://csfs.colostate.edu/pages/documents/2009SeedlingOrderForm_000.pdf. You can also phone (719) 687-2921 or e-mail Stephanie Scott at www.stephanie.scott@colostate.edu.

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Before and After Landscape Comparison – Aesthetic Value of Tree Landscaping and Erosion Control



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