

"Federation Corner" column
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Trees...ya gotta love 'em!

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As we humans huddle inside for warmth during this week's snows, we might take a moment to look out in our yards and appreciate our trees. The deciduous trees are biding their time, gathering the nutrient strength to flower and/or leaf out in the coming spring. And the evergreens stand sentinel, acting as a windbreak against the howling gales that brought our area this latest round of polar temperatures.

We all know that trees provide multiple benefits, including: reducing air and stormwater pollution, sequestering carbon, creating wildlife habitat, increasing property values, and cooling the ambient air temperature during summer heat spells (ah, remember summer and warm temperatures?). But did you know that trees may also be able to lower your income taxes?

Maryland's Forest Preservation Act of 2013 provides new incentives to plant trees and better manage forests. Until now, landowners could deduct between ten and five hundred acres worth of forestry expenses from their income tax liability. As of October 1, 2013 this legislation expands that amount to between three and one thousand acres, making more private property owners eligible for these tax credits.

Maryland property owners with as little as three acres can deduct forestry expenses from their income tax liability. In addition to tree planting, forestry expenses include activities that support forest health, such as controlling invasive plant species (such as English ivy), creating or maintaining streamside forests, and installing water quality protection and other best management practices. This is important, because without maintenance, most forest plantings fail.

The Act also requires that the State stay at or above its current tree canopy of forty percent, and sets two planting goals for the next seven years--forty-three thousand acres of new forests, and twelve and one-half million new trees in urban areas.

As three-fourths of Maryland's forests are privately owned, to meet these goals, private landowners must become involved. Moreover, since eight-five percent of Maryland landowners own less than ten acres of forest, it's critically important that smaller forest plots remain forested. Over the last fifty-eight years, Maryland lost more than four hundred and fifty thousand acres of forestland, averaging seventy-five hundred acres annually due to development.

To qualify for the tax incentives, you must maintain the land in forest cover for fifteen years. You also need to work with a licensed forester to develop a Forest Stewardship Plan on the property, and coordinate your activities with the Montgomery County DNR (Department of Natural Resources) Forester to verify that the work is correctly accomplished.

For more information on the state's forest preservation program and the accompanying income tax benefits to property owners who help sustain forest plots on their properties, contact the Maryland Forest Service by telephone at 410-260-8531, or visit them online at www.dnr.state.md.us/forests/ .

The webpage noted above also contains information on the "Lawn to Woodland" Program, hosted by the Maryland Forest Service, which offers to plant trees on a designated property owner's lawn free of

charge if they own one to four acres of unused lawn. Landowners can convert unused lawn to tree cover at no cost while simultaneously improving the health of our environment.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to the montgomerycivic@yahoo.com