



Joy and Samuel Comstock, owners of Comstock Tree Farm, are the Washington State Tree Farmers of the Year. The couple have owned their tree farm in Grapeview since 1969.

ARLA SHEPHARD/  
SPECIAL TO THE KITSAP SUN

# Tree farm takes state honor

**Grapeview couple have seen business grow**

**By Arla Shephard**  
Special to the Kitsap Sun

**GRAPEVIEW**—Samuel and Joy Comstock have learned a lot in the years since they stumbled into the tree-farming world in the early 1970s.

Joy Comstock remembered the first time they hired a logger to chop down trees on their Grapeview property.

"I started crying for the trees," she recalled. "Thirty to 40 years later, now we have these loggers come in, and I tell them to take that one and that one and that one. I've learned you really can't stop the trees from growing. They come back in a hurry."

Comstock Tree Farm earned the honor of Washington State Tree Farmer of the Year from the American Tree Farm System this year, and the Comstocks couldn't have been more surprised.

"We didn't set out planning for this," Sam Comstock said. "I did grow up on one end of a crosscut saw, though. My family lived in South Kitsap, and our home was heated by wood. I had to go out and cut

firewood with my dad."

For most of his career, however, Sam Comstock worked as a machinist, while Joy Comstock lived much of her life in the Seattle area and worked as a paraeducator.

In 1969, they purchased 20 acres in Grapeview because "we wanted some elbow space," Joy Comstock said.

A few years later, they attended a meeting of the Washington Farm Forestry Association and learned that their property had more value than they'd originally thought.

"We set up a forestry management program so that we could take care of it better," Sam Comstock said. "In the meantime, we were able to pick up contiguous acres and now have 70 acres that we've accrued over the last 40 years."

Nonindustrial private forestland owners such as the Comstocks own about 19 percent of Washington forestland, according to the Washington Forest Protection Association, and statewide there are about 96,000 of these types of owners.

Industrial private forestland owners own 20 percent of Washington forestland, with the government — including tribes, state trusts, federal parks and national forests — owning 61 percent.

Small nonindustrial private owners, in the same class as the Comstocks, can have anywhere from 1 to 3,000 acres, Sam Comstock said.

Comstock Tree Farm grows, harvests, sells and replants timber. The company's last harvest in 2011 cleared 12 acres and exported the lumber and pulp logs to Manke Lumber in Shelton, Weyerhaeuser, Willis Enterprises in Belfair and Shearer Brothers Chipping in Shelton.

"We work mostly local," Sam Comstock said. "It's great for us because we don't have to pay haul costs. We're centrally located in Mason County. In South Kitsap, we know farmers who pay twice as much to get their logs to market. Mason County is a good place to have a tree farm."

Within the next five years, the Comstocks plan to thin their acres again, cutting down trees to allow for the remaining ones to expand to their full potential.

In the meantime, they take care of their forest, combating scotch broom and deer that threaten the 4,000 Douglas fir they planted in 2011 after their last harvest.

"We try to salvage trees that go down, keep invasive species at bay and clear roads. Mostly we let Mother Nature do her thing," Joy

Comstock said.

Regulations that prevent farmers from harvesting certain areas, such as around streams and bodies of water, are among the top concerns for tree farmers today, Sam Comstock said.

A state riparian easement program that would reimburse farmers 50 percent of the value of lumber on land they can't harvest hasn't yet materialized.

"We have about 7 acres on our property that we can't harvest," Sam Comstock said. "I would advise anyone who wants to get into tree-farming to find a place that doesn't have wetlands or water."

Another concern the Comstocks hear from environmentalists is the fear that tree farmers are creating monocultures by replanting the same types of trees.

The Comstocks point to their first replanting as an example of what Mother Nature can do: While they planted 450 Douglas fir seedlings, they were left with 80 Douglas fir starts and a number of other tree varieties, such as white pine and hemlock.

"I've learned you can't really destroy a forest," Sam Comstock said. "It'll come back. All we do is try to encourage the process and speed it up."