

In the series: *Getting Started with Forestry*

## ***Selecting a Forester, quick decisions and long-term impacts***

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Working with a professional forester can increase the benefits you receive from your forest. Professional foresters are an important step in deliberate forest management.

Your forest should be here long after you're gone, and you likely know that the way your forest is managed will be evident for many years or decades. Even so, over 80% of people who own forest land do not take advantage of professionals who can help them. These professionals are foresters, people trained as foresters at universities to help you reach your ownership objectives. However, selecting a professional forester requires some forethought and a little information.

Forestry professionals are an important part of the forest management process. While we have all spent time walking through and enjoying various aspects of forests, forests are complex in their function and diverse in what they have to offer. While you can certainly undertake forest management by yourself, you could also represent yourself in court, perform surgery on yourself, or develop and manage your own investment portfolio. Just as we encourage you to seek professional guidance from lawyers, doctors, and financial consultants, we also feel you deserve professional guidance with your forests.

The first step in selecting a forester is knowing that there are several types of foresters, and even some people who aren't foresters yet want you to think otherwise. There are public foresters employed by the Department of Environmental Conservation or Cornell Cooperative Extension who for free can assist landowners. There are private consultant foresters who represent you and your interests for a fee. There are industrial foresters who work for a forest industry (a sawmill for example) and offer services to forest owners to provide timber and other forest products for their employer. Finally, there are people who call themselves foresters who do not possess the education nor experience to be what they claim. Many from this last group function as 'middle-men' and don't offer forest management services. Unfortunately, because the forestry profession is not licensed, nor registered, nor even defined in New York anyone can "claim" to be a forester; make sure you talk to several potential foresters, ask for a resume, credentials from a professional society, and references.

Only you can select a forester that meets your needs. You need someone you trust and feel comfortable with. The forester needs to understand your objectives, interests, and limitations. The right forester for you may not be the right one for your neighbor. If you pick the right one, you can enjoy a long-term relationship that should be profitable for both of you and ensure the sustainability of your forest.

Department of Environmental Conservation service foresters are available for limited assistance at no cost to the landowner. They are responsible for several federally funded cost share programs, administering the New York forest tax laws, Sections 480 and 480-a, and serving as a catalyst to encourage landowners to actively manage this state's dynamic, renewable forest resource. These individuals are the best place to start for they are a free source of unbiased information. DEC foresters can evaluate your resource and offer suggestions on how to proceed.

Private consultant foresters can offer in-depth services. They should represent the forest owner as their agent whether selling timber, making a forest tax law application, or completing a variety of forest management practices like planting trees or marking property boundaries. Ethically, the consultant's first responsibility is to the landowner. The relationship is similar to that one would expect with a lawyer or doctor. Because of this relationship, the consultant is dependent on his or her fee for survival. As with a doctor, cheapest isn't necessarily best. While a private consultant forester charges a fee for services, the investment typically pays much greater returns. Often, forest owners using private consultants receive more net money and have more trees remaining in better condition in their woodlots following a harvest than forest owners who try to conduct a harvest without a forester.

Industrial foresters often offer their services for free, for a commitment of the timber, or perhaps right of first refusal. Forest industry companies that employ industrial foresters typically have their own policies of operation. One company may offer services for image and not require any commitment on the timber. Others may develop 480-a management plans or other in-depth services and expect the right to purchase any timber harvested in return for those services. As with all foresters, make sure you ask plenty of questions before agreeing to a contract.

Any of these types of foresters deserve consideration. However, you should generally avoid the individual who calls himself or herself a forester but can produce no credentials demonstrating they have professional training as a forester. These individuals may have skills in buying and selling your timber, but they may not have the background necessary to protect your long-term goals and forest values.

So, what should you do next? A good, and inexpensive, first step is to contact a DEC forester or a Cornell Cooperative Extension [Master Forest Owner](#) (MFO) volunteers. MFOs are not foresters, but are forest owners like you who have been trained by Cornell Cooperative Extension to help you get started with forest management. MFO volunteers will likely recommend you contact a DEC forester for professional guidance, but they can help prepare you to optimally utilize your time when the DEC forester arrives. From that point, think through what you want to accomplish with your forests, and seek the guidance of the DEC forester in the next step.

Remember your woodlot is a valuable investment that can grow in value while it pleases you today. Care for it well and it will care for you.