

City boy turned farmer wins big award

By Vera Sloan

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David Tole's work planting and nurturing about a thousand seedlings over nearly a quarter century on the land won him the Thomas County Conservation District's 2012 Kansas Bankers Windbreak Award.

"This is my passion," Tole said about the farmstead and the hundreds of trees that surround the perfectly manicured and maintained farmstead north and west of Levant.

Tole, a city boy, grew up in Wichita and made his way to western Kansas on a harvest crew when he was in high school. Then after graduating from Kansas State University, he returned to Thomas County to work for Greg Bellamy in the Levant area.

When the farm he now calls home came up

for sale in 1988, he said, he jumped on it!

"The place was run down and in need of a lot of work," he said. "We gutted the house down to the studs and started over. We planted trees and then more trees.

"I give my boys a lot of credit for the trees. They got really tired of watering and hoeing, but it paid off."

Tole says that today he has around a thousand trees, some of which he said have been planted several times. If a tree doesn't make it, a new one takes its place in the rows. His seedlings came from Kansas State University Extension Service and from the Natural Resources Conversation Service tree supply. Varieties include red cedar, pine, hackberry, ash, thornless locust, lilacs, sand plum, walnut and many more. Underground drip lines now serve as the water supply to most of the

tree lines, he said, with two to three emitters per tree.

"I had some above-ground water lines, but they got chewed up by unknown varmints," he said, adding that burying more lines is on his "to do" list.

Archived pages from early issues of the Kansas State Horticultural Society publications indicate that the first windbreaks in Western Kansas were planted in 1881 in Rawlins County, between the Beaver and Sappa creeks. For the most part, the first plantings didn't survive and in 1882 they were replanted. The publication also says that the society encouraged the "legislative fathers" to promote tree planting in far western Kansas to attract settlers to the western regions.

The Kansas Forestry Service advocates windbreaks to reduce blowing soil, control drifting snow and protect farmsteads from fierce cold north winds in winter, besides beautifying the farmstead. The service estimates windbreaks can reduce wind velocity on the leeward (protected) side of the windbreak for a distance equal to 30 times the height of the tallest trees. The most effective area of protection extends to about 10 times the height of the trees. An example, they give is that if the windbreak is 30 feet tall, good protection can be expected within an area 300 feet downwind. So its easy to see that the value of a windbreak can't be overestimated.

Windbreaks aren't always easy to maintain, as Tole can attest to. He says the amount of water line he needs to replace with underground line is about 2,200 feet. At nearly half a mile, that's a lot of water lines, but not so much in comparison to what is already in place. Plus, he removes and replaces dying trees regularly. He said the trees in a windbreak create their own microenvironment, as temperatures and humidity differ from those in open areas. They also create a food supply in harsh winters.

Tole said five or six years ago, the tree lines drifted full of snow, and it was not uncommon to see 75 cottontail and jack rabbits feasting on the trees. "They totally denuded some of the smaller trees from the top down to where the snow was drifted," he said with a laugh. "I solved that problem when I got a dog."

Tole has two grown sons. John, 24, lives in Kansas City and works at a credit union.

"Mark is 21 and is on an around-the-world cruise," he said, "compliments of the United States Marines."

Tole says his is a totally dry land farm. He runs around 85 mamma cows, all with a 350- to 400-pound calf at their side and due to calve again in the fall. There's no doubt he'll be busy then. When asked about being a farmer in this era, the former city boy replied, "I wouldn't be here if I didn't like it."



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David Tole and his dog are small in comparison to the huge pine trees that have spread their branches and grown to great heights to protect the Tole home north and west of Levant. Trees are a long-term investment, and in spite of the drought, they have been able to flourish because Tole installed underground drip irrigation lines.



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