

Woman tree farmer makes impact on agriculture



By Kaitlyn Byrne
MSU Ag Communications

OAKLAND -- As the first woman to win the Mississippi Forestry Association Tree Farmer of the Year award, Patrice O'Brien is a testament to the impact women make on the agricultural industry.

O'Brien jumped feet-first into the agriculture business when her father passed away in 1982, leaving the family farm, Twin Oaks Farm in Oakland, for her and her siblings to manage.

"I was 30 years old at the time and had a full-time job and a 2-year-old son," O'Brien said. "And here we had this farm. I felt ill-prepared to manage the farm. We eventually decided we should plant the pasture land with pine trees, and that started our first real experience working with trees."

The farm has since expanded to include hardwood trees.

Although her father was a farmer, O'Brien said she had little experience with farming before her father's death. While many women have faced challenges succeeding in the male-dominated industry, O'Brien said the biggest obstacle was building her own confidence.

"The people in the industry that I've known through the various agricultural organizations I'm in have been supportive and encouraging," O'Brien said. "The biggest problem I've had to overcome has been my own internal feelings of inadequacy. What I've done to help that is taking Mississippi State University Extension Service courses on forestry for the past 15 years. That has helped increase my knowledge and confidence."

O'Brien said she has worked closely with experienced foresters throughout the years to help maximize the farm's potential.

"We've worked with a few foresters over about 30 years," O'Brien said. "I very much believe in using professionals to help manage your forest. There are so many resources, and it's important to get the best price and market timing. It is just like hiring an accountant to manage your money."

O'Brien said the stars aligned when she won the 2013 Mississippi Forestry Association Tree Farmer of the Year award after decades of hard work on Twin Oaks Farm.

"I was humbled to win," O'Brien said. "I know some very outstanding tree farmers who have been recognized with these awards. It really humbles me to be put in a category with such outstanding tree farmers."

Stephen Dicke, Extension professor, has worked with O'Brien in many of his forestry workshops through the years. He said she was recognized for her farm work as well as her service to the industry through leadership roles with the Rankin County Forestry Association and the Mississippi Forestry Association Board of Directors.



2014 Mississippi Forestry Association Tree Farmer of the Year Patrice O'Brien enjoys managing the land, timber and natural resources at her family's farm in Oakland, Miss., on June 13, 2014. (Photo by MSU Ag Communications/Kevin Hudson)

“Patrice is an innovator. She asks a lot of tough questions, but once she has enough information, she will implement quickly,” Dicke said. “Patrice is deriving income from her tree farm in a number of different ways -- timber, hunting lease and fee fishing. She is living what we advocate: Understand your property and yourself and work your strengths.”

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