



Photo courtesy of NIRCS



Many newer landowners have chosen to invest the best years of their lives in caring for a piece of land.

# GETTING STARTED IN STEWARDSHIP

Article by STEVE NELLE

Whatever I think I have learned about land stewardship has not come from within; it has come from others, especially those who actually carry out the day-to-day responsibilities of caring for the land.

Much of my education has come from long-term multigenerational ranch families who have worked and struggled on the land for many years. But in recent years, I have come to appreciate another group of landowners who also has a lot to teach about land stewardship.

There is a large and growing number of newer-type landowners who do not yet have the long history on the land nor the wisdom that comes from a lifetime of farming, ranching and wildlife management. Nevertheless, many of them have important lessons to share.

Having succeeded in the corporate or professional world, they have now chosen to devote the best years of their life to a new endeavor—taking care of a piece of land. While they do not have the seasoned skills and understanding of the old-time landowner, they bring the creative skills and dedication which served them well in the business and professional world. They have a lot to teach us if we will listen.

There is a wealth of information available on conservation and land management. The volume of information is almost

staggering, and for the new landowner, it can be overwhelming to sort through all of the material and figure out where to start.

Since each piece of land is different and each landowner unique, there are thousands of possible combinations of management to try; some will yield good results and some poor. For the newcomer to land stewardship, this article will attempt to answer an important question: How do I get off to a good start?

## YOUR VISION AND PLAN

Before you get started doing anything, you must first establish a vision of what you intend to accomplish. Just getting started with activity will usually not yield a desirable outcome and is often counterproductive.

Your labors must be directed toward a goal, objective or vision. The sculptor has firmly in mind what outcome is desired before taking the hammer and chisel in hand. The builder has spent much time thinking what the project will look like long before the first board is sawn. Likewise, stewardship is driven by a vision of the future—what your dream for the land is. Obviously, the vision must be realistic and achievable and in keeping with the natural potential and limitations of the land; otherwise, it will end in frustration.



It may sound mechanical and artificial, but the best land management is guided by a plan. It does not have to be an elaborate plan and it should not be rigid, but there must be some guiding process that helps you set the course, stay focused and establish priorities. You may choose to get the assistance of a consultant or a conservation agency, but the plan must be your plan and one that is practical, flexible and which helps guide you to accomplishing your vision within your abilities and resources.

### LEARNING AND LOVING YOUR LAND

One of the first priorities after acquiring a piece of land is to begin learning the biological and physical elements of your property. You do not have to know everything or be an expert, but learning the basic “parts of the machine” is an important step for the correct operation of the machine. Making a lifelong study of the soil, water, plants and animals will help you be a better manager and will help you see how to work with nature rather than at cross purposes.

It often starts with learning the more common plants on your place including the grasses, woody plants and the flowering forbs. There are many good field guides to help and many helpful people who are happy to teach you the common plants. After learning the names, learn where they grow, why they increase or decrease, and how they fit into the big picture.

Plant knowledge is often followed by learning about the soils on your place—their characteristics and capabilities and what constitutes a healthy soil. Learning about habitat, wildlife and the water cycle is also important knowledge to cultivate.

It should go without saying that a true love of the land is a prerequisite of genuine stewardship. Owning and managing land is not just a mechanical process of doing the recommended things. It is a relationship with the land whereby the owner and their actions are actually a part of the land, and the land becomes a part of the owner. Putting that affection into action with sound management is the essence of stewardship.

### BUDDING LAND STEWARDS

Many newer landowners are getting off to a good start even though they may have little or no prior experience in owning or managing a piece of rural land. Realizing that they have a lot to learn, they ask for help and soak up information like a sponge.

These five newer-type landowners from the Hill Country are typical of many across the state—they are fast learners, creative, hard-working and ready to share what they have learned when asked. They are different in many ways, but they are all serious students of the land.

Charlie and Diane Armbrust have owned a small place on Crabapple Creek in Gillespie County for the last 10 years. “Think big, move fast and test small.” These are some of Charlie’s business development principles that have also served well in their land management.

He explained: “Thinking big is the overarching vision for the land—what we hope to achieve long term. The fine points emerge later, but we start with our vision. Moving fast means not getting too bogged down in the details but getting started on



Photo courtesy of NRCS

Many landowners, new and old, enlist the assistance of Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) to help guide their conservation efforts.



Photo courtesy of NRCS

A deep appreciation and reverence for the land is the driving force behind genuine stewardship.



Photo courtesy of Hal Zesch

Amy and Hal Zesch established a vision of grassland and habitat health for their Mason County Ranch.





Photo courtesy of NRCS



Land stewardship is a lifelong journey requiring patience, skill, perseverance and dedication.

something quickly. As time passes, priorities will become clear, and we start to focus on the weak links.”

You don’t have to get all your ducks perfectly lined up to get started.

“Test small means don’t bet your dream on one big idea, one consultant’s opinion or one big planting,” Charlie said. “It is never clear what will work the best, so be cautious to test in a small way to insure you are actually moving to the desired goal. Even on a small property like ours, the range of conditions can vary greatly, so one big bet is liable to fail, cost a lot of money and be very frustrating. A small test is easier to implement quickly with less risk.

In the business world and in land management it is important to measure your progress. You will never know for sure if you are achieving your vision if you do not monitor.”

According to Diane and Charlie, “A simple way to measure progress is with dated photos. Reviewing old pictures of the property over several years helps us see the progress and not get too discouraged by the drought or other setbacks.”

Other forms of monitoring can include plant lists, bird lists, soil tests or browse utilization which are compared over time.

Errol and Susan Candy have lived on their small Hill Country place for over two decades and have some helpful advice on how

new landowners can get started. As retired medical professionals, they understand the wisdom of “First, do no harm.”

“This is especially true when coming to a crossroads in management and whether to implement a change or new practice,” Errol said.

In certain cases, it may be better to do nothing rather than intervene and potentially cause more harm than good.

“This forces you to look ahead to the possible side effects of everything you do,” he said.

Susan added, “One thing I’ve found helpful as a new landowner, is to step back and take time to observe your place through a variety of seasons. Doing this will give a much better picture of how sun, shade, drought, big rain, little rain, humidity, wind, livestock, wildlife and your neighbors’ practices will impact your place during different times of the year. Taking the time to watch how your land responds first, before jumping into a project, can save money, time, labor and can help direct efforts for better outcomes.”

The Candys have learned one very important perspective for new city-based landowners.

“Re-train your eye regarding what is beautiful and natural,” they said. “Accept the fact that nature is messy, cluttered, unmown and untidy, at least to a large degree. We have come to appreciate and love the way nature really works and not try to impose our cultural perceptions of beauty to our land.”

Clair Schultis, who has owned a small tract in Kimble County along Fox Hollow for nine years, “The two most helpful things for me to get started were understanding the history of the land (how it got to its current state) and understanding what is possible with management. Having not grown up in the area, it was essential to find local resources—NRCS, county agent and folks who know the area and have spent a lifetime on the land. Volunteering my property to be a guinea pig for research and workshops has been a good way to learn by doing.

“Being a small landowner, just spending time walking all over the place getting to know every square foot was important. With help we have learned the plant life of the ranch (the good, bad and ugly), and we have learned that not all cedar is bad. Once you understand your current state and what’s possible, you can begin to develop a plan to move forward.”

Kim and Pam Bergman own 685 acres along Three Mile Creek near Albert, Texas. Having worked hard in the oil patch overseas

### KEY CONCEPTS FOR GETTING STARTED IN STEWARDSHIP

- Establish your vision for your land.
- Reject easy answers and simple solutions.
- Management is a lifelong process—you will never get finished.
- Learn to “read the land:” soil, water, plants and animals.
- Setbacks are certain; perseverance is essential.
- Work hard, but take time to enjoy your land.
- Learn from your mistakes.
- Ruminant and think hard before acting.
- Don’t bite off too much at a time.
- Be willing to discard old beliefs and local customs when needed.
- Be careful of absolute statements such as “that won’t work here.”
- Be prepared for conflicting advice and information.
- It will be the hardest and most rewarding job you have ever done.



for many years, they finally realized their dream of owning a ranch and have poured themselves into the land for the past 23 years.

Their advice to new landowners is straightforward.

“Study your land, and develop an overall long-term plan,” they said. “Utilize multiple sources of reading material, information from conservation organizations and professional stewardship advisers. Don’t get in a rush to implement your plan and always be ready to make adjustments to your plan along the way. Be patient.”

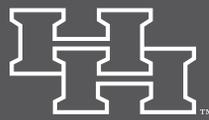
Hal and Amy Zesch own the old family place in Mason County which was put together from many smaller tracts over time. After spending most of his adult life in the corporate world, the Zesches now are actively involved in managing and restoring the ranch previously owned by his grandfather.

Hal and Amy are finding their new stewardship journey to be “fascinating, fun and rewarding.” They remind others that “nature is very resilient if we just give it a chance.” Hal said that the ultimate fulfillment is knowing that your stewardship has left the world a better place.

Hal challenged other landowners: “You are a leader; others will see or hear what you are doing on your place, and you will inspire them to follow your lead.”

The Armbrusts remind landowners of this important but simple truth: “You have a partner—Mother Nature—and she can be very helpful or very frustrating, so keep in mind you have to work with nature and not against it to have long term success. Nature’s timeframes are seasons and years so don’t get too frustrated by short-term setbacks that slow your progress.”

Sometimes, experienced landowners and conservation professionals unwisely lump all newer-type landowners into the group that needs our help and wisdom; but in many cases, we are the ones who can learn from them. Many newer landowners bring skills, energy and ideas that can benefit all of us. We can all learn from each other regardless of how long we may have owned a piece of land. 



# HALL AND HALL®

SALES | AUCTIONS | FINANCE | APPRAISALS | MANAGEMENT

**BOSS RANCH**



**\$18,500,000 | Marathon, TX**

BOSS Ranch is a successful 10,900± acre cattle ranch in Brewster County located within the Glass Mountain Range. Beautiful landscapes, stellar grass production, abundant water, modest improvements, and extraordinary wildlife.

**JS RANCH**



**\$3,750,000 | Jonesboro, TX**

JS Ranch is comprised of 960± acres partially fronting Highway 36. With a central location, the diversity and varied beauty of this ranch, along with recent improvements, offer value and abundant family recreation.

VIEW MORE LISTINGS ONLINE AT  
**WWW.HALLANDHALL.COM**



**PERFORMANCE TOP DRIVES**  
*When Quality Counts, Custom Hunting Rigs*

<b>HIGH RACKS - TOP DRIVES - ATV RACKS</b>			<b>QUAIL RIGS - REPAIR - MAINTENANCE</b>
			
			

**THREE RIVERS, TX - 361-786-3034**  
**PERFORMANCETOPDRIVES.COM**

