

Georgia Landowner Named the 2023 Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year



Georgia landowner Heather Brasell

In Berrien County, Georgia, the Gaskins Estate has been in the Gaskins family for nearly two centuries. Heather Brasell embraced the legacy as she assumed the role of property manager in 2009. Her journey into land stewardship wasn't predetermined but her experience as a forest ecologist in Australia, coupled with a background in science education, laid the groundwork for her passionate commitment to responsible land management.

The Gaskins Estate's landscape showcases Heather's dedication to land stewardship. A harmonious mosaic of managed forests adorns the property, featuring planted pines, natural pines and an array of hardwood species. With almost half the estate meticulously managed for timber

production, Heather nurtures a diverse mix of longleaf, loblolly, and slash pines. The remaining area offers a sanctuary for various hardwood species above the beautiful Alapaha River.

In 2009, recognizing the value of sustainable land management, Heather enrolled the property in the Tree Farm Program, underscoring her commitment to responsible forestry practices. She inaugurated the Gaskins Forest Education Center in 2011, originally envisioned as a resource for research and education. Over time, it evolved into a hub for forest education outreach programs, aiming to bridge the gap between the community and the often-underappreciated significance of forested ecosystems.

Heather's dedication doesn't stop at educational outreach and resonates deeply with forest and wildlife management. She embodies her unwavering commitment to responsible stewardship by meticulously overseeing thinning practices, prescribed burns and invasive species control. Her property nurtures a rich biodiversity, providing habitats for various wildlife species including gopher tortoises, federally endangered indigo snakes and Bachman's sparrows.

To promote sustainable forest practices, Heather undertakes intensive efforts such as controlled thinning to manage timber growth and selective methods to enhance forest health and productivity. A testament to her commitment to maintaining balanced and diverse forest ecosystems, her land management includes prescribed burns that are meticulously applied at specific intervals to reduce competition from woody species and to foster a healthy understory.

Heather's educational initiatives extend beyond her property and embrace the broader community. She orchestrates various workshops, facilitating interactive sessions and field days. From plant identification workshops to interagency field days, she actively engages in promoting an awareness and understanding of forest management practices. The Gaskins Forest Education Center serves as a haven for groups of all ages, welcoming students, landowners and professionals to learn about conservation, forestry and the importance of responsible land stewardship.

Heather Brasell's relentless efforts in sustainable forest management, conservation and education have transformed the Gaskins Estate into a model of responsible land stewardship. Her journey, shaped by her passion and driven by her commitment, stands as a beacon for preserving this cherished legacy, ensuring its endurance for generations to come.

We celebrate Heather's commitment to sustainable forest management and her recognition as 2023's Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year.