

Chapter 30 - “Wrap Up”

Congratulations, you've reached the end of this year's edition. We've covered a lot of material. I know that it probably didn't all sink in, but at this point, you should have a solid grounding of what the tree planting industry is all about, and a broad foundation upon which to build further knowledge.

Reviewing all of this material has probably really opened your eyes. When you first heard about tree planting, you probably got a mental image that involved a lot of manual labour, and not much thinking. That couldn't be further from the truth. If tree planting was an hourly wage-based job, that stereotype would probably be a correct perspective. But tree planting is not paid hourly, it's paid by piece rates. The more productive you are, the more money you make. Because of that, it's in your best interest to learn, study, practice, and refine your techniques, to make yourself as fast and efficient as possible. The piece-rate nature of the industry has turned it into a very intellectual exercise, where the smartest planters can leverage their knowledge into money.

The amount of information in these tutorials has probably been overwhelming for you. At this point, you've been inundated with lots of facts, suggestions, and terminology, and I have no doubt that you probably don't remember more than a third of it all. Once you've been planting for three or four weeks, I'd recommend that you review some of the key material again, particularly the sections about employment standards, common BC coniferous trees, spacing/density/excess, and maximizing productivity. You might even want to review the complete series again before the start of your second season.

There are also a pair of appendices at the back of this book which cover additional material that wasn't included in any of the main chapters of this book. Those appendices cover a dictionary of planting terms, and lists of acronyms & abbreviations. In the past, I had five other appendices in the book, to go into more depth about plants, animals, birds, insects, and tree diseases. However, this book was getting far too fat for a print edition, so I moved those appendices to online-only in order to cut back on the size slightly.

The forums on the Replant.ca website are an extremely useful archive of historical information and discussions related to tree planting, especially of the period from about 2004 to 2018. After that, traffic started to drop as Facebook groups became busier, but the forums are still used each year for sharing information about BC public bid results.



Figure 30.01
Check Out the Replant.ca Forums.

With more than 20,000 posts, from more than a thousand contributors, there is a wealth of historical information that you can learn. Although the industry has changed a lot in the past ten years, a lot of aspects are still exactly the same.

Field Practice

When it's finally time for you to go to the field and start doing some hands-on practice, your instructor will walk you through the basic steps of planting once again. You'll start to get a feel for the repetitive motions that are required to plant a tree properly, with acceptable quality. Start slow. Focus on getting it right, not getting fast. For about a week to two weeks, planting is going to feel awkward. You're going to look at experienced planters around you, and wonder how they can do it so quickly. You're going to feel like a failure, because you can't keep up. Don't worry, this is normal. As you're getting started, just focus on planting each tree properly, and don't worry about your paycheque. Once you get the basics down, your crew leader will talk to you and start encouraging you to speed up, and will give you tips on where to shave a few seconds off every tree.

You'll probably want to quit at least once, or several times, but stick it out. I promise, it gets easier. If you can promise yourself that you won't quit for one calendar month, you WILL get over the hump and you'll get to the point where you're starting to make respectable wages, and you'll feel like planting is natural. I won't go so far as to say that it'll become easy, because you'll always be pushing the limits, but it won't feel impossible.

During your first few weeks, keep careful records of your daily production, earnings, and portal-to-portal hours. Remember, your company must top you up to minimum wage (including applicable overtime equivalents) on each paycheque in which you didn't earn the equivalent through your piece-rate tree prices. If your company is short-changing you, continue to keep very detailed records all season. Once the season is over, you can take advantage of help from the Employment Standards Branch to resolve any discrepancies, without having to worry about the risk of getting fired.



Figure 30.02
Recording Tallies & Related Information.

Keep close track of your tallies, as well as other information related to the work that you did, ie. weather, block numbers, species planted, planting partners, time that you left camp, time that you returned to camp, and anything else that could be deemed important.

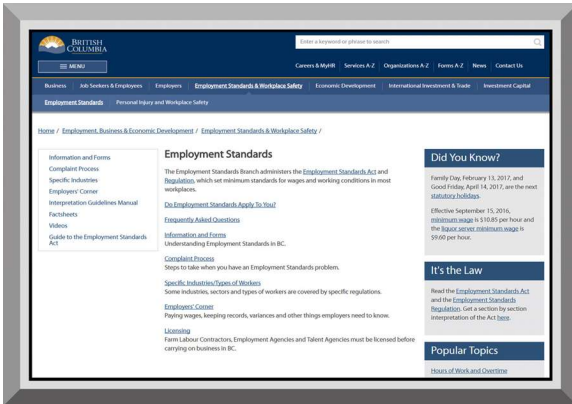


Figure 30.03
Understand Employment Standards.

*Know the employment standards legislation for the province that you're working in. If your employer is cheating you, you should contact your provincial ministry of labour as soon as your season is over (or as soon as you quit).
Source: BC Government.*

To get better, you need to practice. The more trees you plant, the faster you get. That seems to go without saying, because it's so blatantly obvious, but your speed increases only as you reach more milestones. Let me put it this way. Let's say that by the time you plant fifteen thousand trees, you'll be able to plant fifteen hundred trees per day in easy ground. That seems like a good goal. The trick is to plant your first fifteen thousand as quickly as possible, which gets you to that point of being a 1500-per-day planter. This means that during your crucial first couple of weeks, you need to keep your head down and keep moving. Don't give up and come back to the cache and sit for 45 minutes for lunch. Grab a quick bite, and get right back to work. The day doesn't pass any more quickly if you're sitting down, and it doesn't go any faster depending on whether you're happy or miserable. You don't make any money when you're not planting. If you're stuck out on the block for ten hours, you may as well be making money during that time, so don't stop working.

If you are planting 1000 trees per day in mid-May, and 2000 trees per day at the end of the season, how many trees do you think you miss out on if you miss a day of work in mid-May? I'll give you a hint: This is a trick question. The answer, in the long term, is 2000. The reason for this is even though you might have only planted 1000 trees on the chronological day that you missed, you also lost out on the opportunity to learn more and practice more. That lost opportunity means that you're not moving up "the production curve" as quickly as you would have with that extra day of practice. Another way to look at it is this way. What if you could graph your daily production on a chart and remove all the actual calendar dates, so you only listed your daily production as "day 1" and "day 2" and so on, up to the last day of the season? You'll see that near the end of your season, all your days are similar, say around 2000 trees in this example. So if you only work 59 days in a season, instead of

60, then you're losing out on the production equivalent of a day at the end of that graph, regardless of when it was that you actually missed the day of work. This is another reason why you want to stay as healthy and well-rested as possible throughout the season, and why the best planters are the ones who get to the block and spend the entire day planting, instead of taking long breaks at the cache.

Have you heard of the 10,000 hour rule? It was written by Malcolm Gladwell in a book called Outliers. In it, he said that anyone who practiced 10,000 hours at a skill would essentially become a professional, and master that skill. In an average long tree planting season in the BC Interior, a planter may work or "practice" for a thousand hours. To clarify, I'm including some non-planting time in that total, but time spent after dinner or around a campfire discussing ways to improve your planting techniques can still lead to self-improvement. If we assume that the rough number of a thousand hours per season is valid, then you're looking at approximately ten years before you put in your 10,000 hours. That's ten years before you become a tree planting "professional."

The learning curve for tree planting never really stops. You might think at the end of your first season that you've learned it all. You haven't. You'll learn many more things in your second season. The same will happen in your third, fourth, fifth, and sixth years, and beyond. At the end of each of those seasons, you'll think you've finally mastered everything there is to know. You haven't. You'll continue to learn new tricks, and become more efficient, throughout your entire career. I still learn new tricks and techniques every season.

Career Options

Speaking of careers, the previous chapter already touched upon a variety of careers within the general field of forestry. However, what about advancement within the tree planting industry, which we covered in Chapter 24? Depending on the company, it's possible for a planter to "move up the ladder" within the company in as little as two to five years, and become a crew boss or a quality checker or a tree runner.

I feel that when evaluating various companies, the time that a planter has to put in before being considered for a position as a crew leader is a strong indicator of the quality and professionalism of the company. If you're working for a company where second- and third-year planters are regularly becoming promoted to leadership positions, that's a good indication that employee turnover within your company is very high, and you might want to consider working at different employers. In many companies, it's more frequent that someone needs to have at least five years of planting experience before being placed in charge of a crew. However, that can vary from company to company.

If a supervisory or leadership role is something that you eventually aspire to, it's possible (and recommended) that you spend at least one planting season thinking about this idea, and taking advantage of that time to watch/learn from leaders in your own company. The more knowledge and

experience that you can accumulate by quietly watching others, the better you'll be if you become a leader someday.

Final Advice

The days are long, but the seasons are short.

Good luck with your planting. Again, if you're a first-time planter and you feel like quitting at any point during your first several weeks, remember a promise that you need to make to yourself. No matter how frustrated you get, don't quit until you've worked for a full calendar month. If you managed to get yourself a job, and spent a few days on the blocks starting to learn to plant, you've already invested too much time and money for it to make sense for you to quit. Stick it out. After thirty days in the bush, you'll have gotten over the hump, and you'll realize that you CAN be successful as a planter.

Keep track of your numbers. I don't just mean this on a day-to-day basis, to make sure that your paycheques are correct. I also mean to pay attention to your daily averages, and your true earnings. Understand what your expenses are in relation to the money that you earn. Also, remember that you may someday want to know your annual planting totals, in case you end up chasing a long-term career goal such as hitting a million trees.

Keep track of some of your block locations. You can do this by writing down block numbers, or by using apps on mobile devices that overlay GPS coordinates on top of photos. Save them somewhere semi-permanent. Someday, when you're a lot older, you may want to come back and look at the trees you planted in your first season. At the moment, a free app called GeoCam (by Wazar) is one of the best ways to do this.

It is in planters' best collective interest to stop telling other people that planting is great, and that they will make a lot of money. When you do that, you're basically helping employers recruit other employees. That shifts the supply/demand labour balance in favour of the employer. There will be less support for fair prices if some owners are not worried about whether or not they can recruit a workforce easily. To be clear, I do think that tree planting can be a great job for the right people. Let's work together to keep it that way.

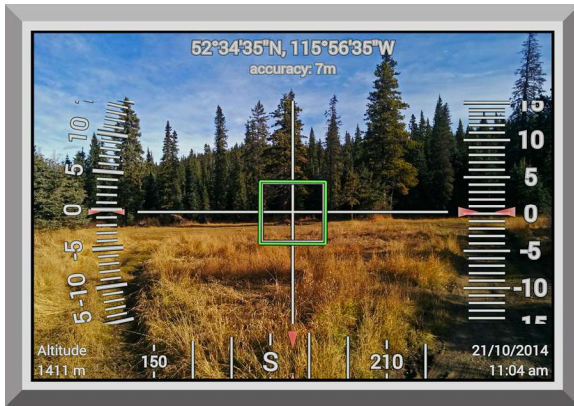


Figure 30.04
GeoCam App Photo.

This app uses the normal camera in your smartphone, and overlays a grid of GPS and other data on top of the photo. It's free.

Finally, if you keep thinking that tree planting is pointless, and all you're really doing is facilitating the production of toilet paper for your grandchildren, remember that replanting logged land is better than not planting at all. If the human race manages to destroy itself in the near future, as I sometimes think is inevitable, at least some of our trees will outlast us.

Good luck with your planting ...

- Jonathan "Scooter" Clark

For more photo and video resources associated with this chapter of the book, visit:
www.replant.ca/training/wrapup