

There's no way this is worth it.

I swat at black flies, horse flies – the sun scorching my already burnt neck and back. Even though I've already had five liters of water, I'm parched. I glance at my watch and groan. It's only noon.

One more tree, one more tree, one more tree. One, two, tree! One, two, tree! The rhythm of tree planting resounding in my head. The silence of the clear-cut ringing in my ears; the only sounds are my breath, the *thunk!* of my shovel in the earth, the rustle of a tree in my bag as I pull it out.

This is how I decided to spend my summer: planting thousands of trees a day in logged forests. Usually finding solace in solitude and nature, I stare at the naked, scarred, slashed landscape. "Clear cut" is what it is called (a misnomer, I think as I glare at the heaps of logs and snarls obscuring my view). It is anything but beautiful to behold, and it mocks me as I stumble through it, doubled over with each tree I have to put in the ground. My shoelace catches. I trip. Face first into a clump of stinging nettle. My face on fire. Oh well, it's just nature's Botox, I think as I try to wipe away the pain of the fiery leaves. Maybe I'll finally have Angelina Jolie's plump, luscious lips. I purse them. They're not plumper; they just hurt.

Three o'clock rolls around, and I've been replaying the same scene from *Mrs. Doubtfire* in my head for the past hour. Over, and over, and over, and over again. I'm going crazy, I think as I unwrap another 270 trees to put in my bags, and cram half a peanut butter and jam sandwich in my mouth. I've planted 3,000 trees at this point today, and there are still two? three? hours until quitting time. You plant until you're told to stop. As a tree planter, I am paid per tree that I plant – that is if it fits the specs that we are given: properly planted, no bent roots, not too shallow or deep in the ground, 1,400 stems per hectare, no leaning trees. There are a thousand ways to plant a tree wrong and only one way to plant it right, and you're only paid if it's planted right. Staring out into my land, I take a deep breath, and head out again.

One, two, tree! Tree planting is a quintessential Canadian summer job. It attracts people from all walks of life: university kids trying to fund their higher education, drug addictions counselors, high-school teachers, wandering spirits who spend their time travelling the globe, photographers, bankers, rock climbers, construction workers, oil riggers, and me, a lost soul trying to get by after graduating from university. The job pays well if you plant well, and it is often the way students finance their studies. For me? I needed a job to get me by until my uncertain future became clear. Tree planting was appealing: a tough job for tough people, living outside in a tent all summer, and making money. What isn't often recounted when recruiting new rookies for the job is how you go "bush crazy". This was clear to me within the first two weeks: screaming at the top of my lungs, yelling in gibberish as I planted, attempting to remember lyrics to 90s pop songs, reciting poetry, creating poetry, envisioning inventing a machine to plant trees for me, and coming up with acrobatic ways to dodge stinging nettle, devil's club, clawing tree branches, wasp nests, and swarming flies became daily occurrences.

Canada is home to at least thirty reforestation companies of all sizes. Every year, an estimated 500 million trees are planted across Canada in order to establish new

forests in areas that have been harvested for timber.¹ Private companies engaged in deforestation for lumber or paper products are often responsible for reforesting the areas they have cut down, and thus hire crews of tree planters to do the grueling job of replanting trees, one-by-one. This ensures that these companies can continue to fell their given quota of trees – a number designated by the Canadian government – and, because tree planting shows initiative in sustainable forestry, more than their quota.

Often, tree planters are located in areas of clear-cut so large that they can be seen from space.²



A tree planter evaluates her land for the day

Getting up in the morning is arguably the hardest part of this job. Here are some of the ways I have been awakened:

- My alarm shrilly beeping in my ear at 5:45am, 5:50, 6:00, 6:10...
- A surge of adrenaline rushing through my body when I think I have overslept.
- Bear bangers exploding near my tent.
- Rap, electronic, and dub step music blasting over the speaker system. And sometimes the *Game of Thrones* theme song.
- My supervisor yelling over the speaker system.

1. "The Basics". tree-planter.com; Advanced Safety Management. 2014; accessed

2. "Clear Cut Mapping & Deforestation". Natural Resources Canada. Government of Canada. 30 October 2013; accessed 1 September 2014. <<http://www.nrcan.gc.ca/earth-sciences/geomatics/satellite-imagery-air-photos/satellite-imagery-products/educational-resources/9305>>.

- Truck horns.
- Extreme cold, heat, or rain.
- Mosquitos buzzing in my ear.
- A chain saw whirring outside my tent with the explicit purpose of waking me up.

Rarely is there a gentle wake up. At least it's never boring. Joints creak and whine in pain every morning as I clamber out of my sleeping bag, yank on muddy pants and a now-brown button-down shirt, a fleece that has seen better days, and a hand-knit toque, all of which will in all probability be thrown out at the end of the season due to the impossibility of ever cleaning them enough to be acceptable in civilized society. My boots are either still wet or stiffened to a solid block of leather and lace with mud. Even gaiters can't keep out the water and mud that seep under the laces and encase my feet, leading to cracked heels, trench foot, and ingrown toenails.

Stumbling out of my tent, I'm usually the first to arrive at the lunch table to slap together two pieces of the whole wheat version of Wonder Bread with jam and peanut butter, and shove as much food into my Tupperware as will fit. The sun at 6am in northern Alberta is already high in the sky, often signifying the impending heat of the day that will scorch our skin and coax our every pore of its last drop of water. And yet we plant on. There is rarely something to prevent us from doing our job: we've planted through scorching heat, beating rain, howling wind, and blizzarding snow. We've planted through tendonitis, nosebleeds, back pain, exhausted muscles, and the flu. And yet we somehow come out whole on the other side. Lean and muscular, tanned and bruised, callused and scratched, but somehow still smiling. The human ability to laugh and joke through almost anything is astounding to me. After being stung by a wasp between my eyes, my face swelled up to the point that I could barely see, and I couldn't help but laugh along with my friends at how ridiculous I looked. Laughter is one of the only things that gets us through: after the competition, anger, and tiredness are stripped away, we can always make each other laugh. And there is something humorous about the situation: a group of gangly misfits gathering in one place to spend our days bend over shoving saplings into the ground in order to make a buck.

The forestry industry in Canada has a long and sometimes tumultuous past. The Giant Sequoias and spruces that used to cover much of the west coast were coveted for their beautiful grain and sheer size. These trees began to be felled with incredible efficiency, with more money and equipment pouring into the logging industry. Logging was a dangerous job, with people getting pinned, speared, or otherwise crushed by falling trees, unsafe equipment, or falls from incredible heights.

Once it was recognised that the speed and efficiency of the logging industry could not continue if the forests were to continue to supply the world with premium wood, tree planters arrived on the scene. Starting off as a tough little group of hippies, tree planters began the enormous task of attempting to reforest deforested lands with the aim of providing sources of wood that did not come from virgin forests, and were thus sustainable. The job has since exploded, and now planters come from all walks of life, with the aim of decreasing the amount of virgin forest felled.

Trees planted often grow for about fifty to eighty years before they are felled for industrial use.

Robert Service unwittingly captured the essence of the tree-planter when he penned his poem, "The Men That Don't Fit In":

There's a race of men that don't fit in,
A race that can't stay still;
So they break the hearts of kith and kin,
And they roam the world at will.

They range the field and they rove the flood,
And they climb the mountain's crest;
Theirs is the curse of the gypsy blood,
And they don't know how to rest.

If they just went straight they might go far;
They are strong and brave and true;
But they're always tired of the things that are,
And they want the strange and new.

They say: "Could I find my proper groove,
What a deep mark I would make!"
So they chop and change, and each fresh move
Is only a fresh mistake.

And each forgets, as he strips and runs
With a brilliant, fitful pace,
It's the steady, quiet, plodding ones
Who win in the lifelong race.

And each forgets that his youth has fled,
Forgets that his prime is past,
Till he stands one day, with a hope that's dead,
In the glare of the truth at last.

He has failed, he has failed; he has missed his chance;
He has just done things by half.
Life's been a jolly good joke on him,
And now is the time to laugh.

Ha, ha! He is one of the Legion Lost;
He was never meant to win;
He's a rolling stone, and it's bred in the bone;
He's a man who won't fit in.³

3. Service, Robert. "The Men That Don't Fit In".



Tree planters take a break on top of a crummy

The modern version of tree planting began in the 1970s by a man named Dirk Brinkman and a group of grungy misfits in British Columbia. Winning one of the first tree planting contracts in Canada, he introduced some innovations that have carried on till today: bags that are strapped around the waist for easy access to the trees, leaving the hands free to shovel and plant; setting up camp next to a clear cut in order to diminish travel time to the block; changing the style of planting to increase the number of trees planted.⁴

While tree prices have stayed relatively the same for the past 40 years, (about 10 cents per tree in northern Alberta), the number of trees planted each year has skyrocketed. An average planter in 1970 could – on a good day – plant about 800 trees, whereas now, the record for most trees planted in Canada in a single day is held by Ken Chaplin, clocking in with an astounding 15,170 trees.⁵

BBC has made a documentary series, “World’s Toughest Jobs” in which tree planting makes a significant appearance.

The act of planting a tree is not hard: put shovel in ground, plant tree in hole, stomp hole shut, move on. Once is not difficult. Even a hundred times is not difficult. But thousands of times, all day long, every day for two months or more? The difficulty is in

4. Kendall, Nick. “Do It With Joy”. Documentary, 27:53. 1976; accessed 10 Aug 2015. < <https://vimeo.com/7990821>>.

5. Gill, Charlotte. *Eating Dirt: Deep Forests, Big Timber, and Life with the Tree-Planting Tribe*. Greystone Books; Vancouver, British Columbia. 2011.

the mentality of the job. Can you stay sane? Will your body hold up from the repetitive strain you place on it all day every day? For a large portion of people, that answer is a resounding “No”. There are always quitters. We see them come, we often don’t see them go, and they fade from our memory as if they were never there. Their names are forgotten, but they are occasionally remembered by a personality trait, a physical feature. The kid with the long hair and earrings. The French guy who used post-it notes instead of flagger to mark where his trees were. The guy who worked in a mint. They are written off as weak – but are they? We are the poor sods left behind to tackle the unwieldy swaths of land scarred by our human counterparts in the forestry industry. We are the ones who bend over for ten cents thousands and thousands of times a day. We have very little choice or command over our day, and those who left? They’re free.

Tendonitis, bug bites, infections, stings, slivers, lost fingernails, and swollen knees aside, planting has given me the freedom to pursue that which I have wanted to in the past, but couldn’t afford. I have lived four months in Ecuador learning Spanish, working in reforestation, and learning about the cloud forests of such a beautiful country. Another four months in Vermont, pursuing more avidly a life of biking, hiking, local farming, and the outdoors. In my own way, I have financed my independence through a summer of backbreaking work that has led to not only the freedom of my daily life outside of tree planting, but also to a bond between those of us who know how hard one must work to be able to fit into an image of what society has deemed the meaning of success. Money has been a constant measure of a person’s success, but there are other measures outside the constraints of monetary value: personal happiness, friendships acquired, memories created. No, we’re not lawyers or doctors or CEOs. We don’t have houses or mortgages or even necessarily a place that we call home. We’ve found an alternative to the daily grind of a “normal” lifestyle – one that provides a freedom of movement, a respect for unconventional definitions of success. Maybe it is a mark of my generation that we have a new idea of what it means to be successful, and how to balance this definition of success with happiness: a non-conformist, new age replacement to the daily grind.



Celebrating the end of a shift.
Photo: Meg Horne



Workin' hard!



Enjoying the end of a tough shift



Celebrating the final night of planting with a bonfire and tiki torches made of logs

Stephanie Clement is a tree planter, recent university graduate, and wanderer. When she's not planting the forests of the future, she travels, writes, farms, takes photographs, bikes, runs, climbs, skis, and listens to many podcasts. She is a general explorer, and has no idea what is going to happen next in her life. But it's more fun that way, right? And if all else fails, there's always planting.