Arizona's Johnny Appleseed

John York doesn't spread apple seeds, he plants bare branches that become trees along Arizona's precious rivers and streams.

BY LORRAINE B. KINGDON
John York grins at the thought, but he admits his story parallels that of American folk hero, Johnny Appleseed.

Appleseed spread apple seeds. York plants bare branches that become trees along Arizona's precious rivers and streams. After 35 years and thousands of trees, York still is excited about his job as riparian specialist with the U.S. Soil Conservation Service.

"Stub planting can make a major impact on riparian areas across the country, but Arizona is leaps and bounds ahead of most other states," York says.

Planting dormant poles in riparian areas in Arizona began in the 1930s when the Civilian Conservation Corps put in hundreds of thousands of trees. The techniques for planting have been investigated thoroughly, or as York puts it, "We've tried everything we could think of, with all kinds of trees."

Dormant poles are cut from stands of rapidly growing trees that are four years old or younger. Side branches are removed, leaving the tip and the next two lower side branches. The poles then are placed in augered holes along the stream.

Since it is harder to find suitable trees today, the SCS and the State Land Department operate their own plant materials center on the north side of Tucson.

York and the center staff are evaluating plants from around the world, particularly cottonwoods, as possible riparian-area stub candidates.

"We're looking for super trees," York says with a laugh. "We've stuck 18-inch cottonwood branches in the ground here, irrigated them, and gotten 10 feet of growth already this year."

Trees grow quickly out in the field, even without irrigation. York remembers planting a black willow pole at a Colorado River Indian Tribes picnic ground near Parker. Three months later, the tree was 20 feet tall and furnishing shade from the hot sun.

Stub planting is not a cure-all for riparian ills, but it can help control erosion, provide a habitat for wildlife and turn a bare, eroded riverbank into a recreation area. Of course, doing all three in the same spot, at the same time may be impossible. York advises deciding on a goal before designing riparian plantings.

That was his advice when York met recently with San Pedro River ranchers, town and government agency representatives and agricultural experts from The University of Arizona. UA Cochise County Extension agricultural agent Eric Schwennesen pointed out the conflict among urban people interested in recreation, ranchers who want grazing rights for their cattle and wildlife that have habitat needs of their own.

In Southern Arizona, one of John York's favorite spots is along the banks of the Santa Cruz River north of Tubac. During the 1983 flood, trees were torn down and stacked in desolate, tangled windrows. The riverbank eroded dangerously near an elementary school.

In 1984, York planted cottonwoods, willows and Arundo, a native cane. He helped stabilize the riverbank with 10-feet-high, metal supports that now are invisible in the greenery. Today, the willows are 40 feet tall and the cane has spread to form a dense green thicket stretching for a mile along the river. Some of the cottonwoods are dying because they are above the water table. Even so, they serve their purpose, helping to form a dynamic riparian environment.

York's stubs are not magic wands. A great deal can go wrong. And has. Once, the stubs died after contractors hired to plant them waited too long to put them into the ground. York has planted stubs near a picnic spot to add shade, only to find them used as hot dog sticks. Beavers and gophers find the dormant stubs "as good as a popsicle." Horses like to peel the bark away.

Horses, cows, wildlife and people need to be kept away from stub plantings for two or three growing seasons. After that, York says he has no qualms about letting cattle graze riparian areas.

Beaver are a different story.

"We can't just let them go out and cut down the trees. Because they will—they'll completely denude a watershed in two years. Beaver must be controlled as long as the trees live," York says.

While beaver aren't his favorite form of wildlife, York is concerned about building a favorable habitat for both people and animals along Arizona's streams and rivers. He firmly believes there are scientific, economic and political reasons to repair the riparian areas of Arizona.

"It won't get done until we all get excited and emotional," York says. He is.

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