



A case study of Ardoch and Threeland Farms, East Renfrewshire

Why plant trees on farms?

Iain and Marion Macdonald of Ardoch and Threeland farms (250 hectares), East Renfrewshire say they have turned their livestock farm around by planting acres of hard-to-farm land with trees. They were farming 160 beef cows and 500 sheep until 2011, when Iain had a serious back operation, and the pair decided they needed to make a change. *“Between the overdraft and the hours we were working we were lucky to be making a decent profit,”* says Iain. *“If we hadn’t made some changes we’d have been in a real guddle. You have to look at the bigger picture and get the best out of your farm, rather than keep doing what you’ve always done. It’s getting harder to make a living out of farming. I might have considered leaving farming if I hadn’t diversified.”*



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The pair wound down their beef cow operation by 2013, deciding to increase their sheep to 700 and to look around for ways to reorganise and diversify.

“The sheep are easier for myself and our daughters to work with than feisty beef cattle,” says Marion.

With quite a few trees on their farm already, Iain firstly applied for a felling licence for a wind-blown area of woodland. He also was accepted for the Non-domestic Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme and installed a log biomass boiler to use his stock of timber as fuel. *“When we did the biomass everyone thought we were nuts!”* he says. But five years on it heats the farm house, workshop and provides hot water for the sheep sheds.

In 2012 Iain read an article about grants for tree planting and decided to find out more, eventually applying for a previous Rural Priorities contract for woodland creation. In 2013/4 the couple received a capital payment of £70,000 to plant 29,000, mainly broadleaved, trees over 12 hectares of land.

The contract runs for 15 years with annual maintenance payments worth a total of £59,400. Crucially, these payments cover the cost of fencing, protecting and maintaining the trees as well as loss of farm income until the forest becomes productive.

“Beforehand, stock would go down steep bankings and into the burn, or cross marshy grass to get to fresher pasture. Rescuing calves and lambs or at gathering time was a nightmare. Now these areas are fenced off it’s made a big difference to sheep management. In four or five years the trees will be big enough to make a lambing corridor, with a line of shelter each side, with good grass in the middle.”

The fences also stop animals straying onto neighbours’ land and vice versa, which is good for biosecurity – making sure disease doesn’t spread – and for saving time spent fetching and returning them.

“The first scheme was about creating shelter and managing the land better. The second is an investment for our daughters.”





At the end of 2017 the couple successfully applied for a second woodland creation grant under the current Forestry Grant Scheme. This was for a much larger plantation – 80,000 trees over 37.5 hectares. The initial grant was £197,841 with an annual maintenance payment of £8,775 over five years. *“The site was picked because very little of it was good upland grazing. It was a disaster, mainly rushes. Over the last 15 years I’ve sprayed, limed, slagged and topped it and at the end the rushes were as thick as I’d ever seen them. I spent around £15,000 for almost no return.”*

That land is now a sapling conifer plantation of mostly softwoods like Sitka Spruce and Scots Pine. *“Some say the grant is just a one-off payment,”* continues Iain, *“but under the Forestry Grant Scheme you receive the five-year maintenance payment and can still claim Basic Payment Scheme on the land. Looking forward, I see the woodland as a commercial investment, which we could sell on to an investor, or wait and harvest the timber ourselves. The bank was easy to work with and will even lend you money against the woodland so it must be a sure thing!”*

The couple worked with a forestry agent they trusted, doing some of the estimate work themselves, shopping around for the best tree and fence prices.

“Some people think farming and trees don’t go well together, but it can work.”

“It’s a way to make a similar amount of money without being so physically hard on yourselves,” says Marion. *“Working all the hours of a day, not getting good returns because of the price of inputs, doing it all yourself. People talk about the three Fs – feed, fertiliser and fuel – with prices always on the up. It makes it hard to balance the books.”*

“Some think farming and trees don’t go well together but it can work,” agrees Iain. *“It’s a way of turning round any non-productive land on your farm. You get different incomes at different times- it’s a better cash flow, rather than being reliant on selling all your stock on one or two sale days.”*

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Trees are also part of the Scottish Government's climate change plan. Trees sequester carbon in the soil, reducing greenhouse emissions, and create corridors for wildlife to travel through.

"When I look at how well the farm looks now, with the bad bits shut off, it's so much tidier, and we have some money coming in to invest in other areas on the farm," says Iain. "We are miles in front of where I thought we were going to be with it."



Iain MacDonald's tips for getting started:

1. Don't be afraid: just do it!
2. You need an agent you trust and can work with. Meet different ones and chose one you feel happy with.
3. The application is daunting. Let the agent do that.
4. But don't let the agent do everything else – don't be afraid to get prices from different nurseries for trees. Fencing is hard work if you do it yourself but we worked alongside a contractor and did the rabbit netting. If there are things you can do yourself – this gets the costs right down.
5. You need to get a loan or backing from the bank initially but don't be afraid of that – you'll have a contract from Forestry Commission Scotland with a Schedule of Works outlining the grant, so it's ok to spend the money first!



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