

The Life Cycle of a Plantation

“Plantations” are stands of even-aged trees that are in the ground for 50 to 90 years, depending on how good the site is for growing trees. Here is a sample timeline:

- Prior to Planting – Site Preparation: After the prior harvest, the ground is prepared for planting. This can include using heavy equipment to “contour till” the soil and the application of herbicide to prevent brush from sprouting.
- Year 0 – Planting: Seedlings grown from seed harvested from that geographical area are planted in a species mix and spacing specified by a Registered Professional Forester (RPF). Trained planting crews plant the trees and the RPF verifies that the trees were planted according to specification. Typically, 300 trees per acre are planted.
- Years 1 to 7 – Monitoring: Trees are checked annually for survival, growth of competing brush and grass species, and other damaging agents such as gophers. If the brush is competing significantly with the seedlings, herbicides are applied, usually once or twice during the 6 year period.
- Year 7 – Pre-commercial thinning: Contracted crews select trees to remove, with the objective of attaining optimum spacing and maintaining species diversity. The trees are easy to cut, since they are only 6 to 8 feet tall. Approximately half of the trees are removed, leaving about 150 trees per acre.
- Years 7 to 25 – Monitoring: Trees are checked annually for pests and disease, action is taken if necessary. If the plantation is in a high risk area for fire danger, the lower branches may be pruned and herbicide may be applied to minimize brush, which is fuel for fire.
- Year 25 to 35 – Commercial Thin: Approximately half of the trees are removed, leaving about 75 trees per acre. Harvested logs are taken to a lumber mill and made into products such as dimensional lumber and fencing material. The byproducts (tree tops and limbs) from a commercial thin are usually piled and burned onsite. However, the material can be chipped and taken to a biomass plant.
- Year 60 to 70 – Second Commercial Thin or Harvest: Usually, all trees are harvested at one time, and the cycle starts over. However, there is an option to thin the trees and leave the remainder to grow even bigger.