

POLK SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION Quarterly

Fall 2023 Volume 3 Issue 4

2023 POLK SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENT



This year the Polk Soil & Water Conservation District is awarding one \$3,000 college scholarship to a very deserving Polk County High School graduate. To be eligible for this educational award applicants are expected to pursue a degree in agriculture, agronomy, conservation, environmental science, natural resources or a related field.

Polk County High graduate Michelle Ketwitz is this year's recipient of the educational award. Ketwitz has enrolled into NC State University in Raleigh. She is majoring in Plant Biology. Michelle is the daughter of Ronald and Karla Ketwitz.

"There is a part of me that is extremely interested in working towards achieving new medical outcomes using plants," said Ketwitz. "Whether that is aiding the discovery or creation of a new plant based drug, or finding a way to improve our current use of plants in the medical field."

Conservation Board Chairman Richard Smith says, "The quality of our student applicants for our scholarship selection committee interviews continue to be exceptional. The Board is proud to support our local graduates' efforts to continue their education."

CONSERVATION PLANTS – Spicebush



Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) is a deciduous shrub that typically grows 6 to 12 feet in height. This native plant can be found growing in bottomlands, open woods, ravines, valleys and along streams. It prefers partial shade but tolerates full sun as long as good soil moisture is present. Spicebush is sensitive to both heat and drought conditions.

This shrub gets its name in part from the foliage that when crushed produces a spicy odor. The tiny greenish-yellow flowers that emerge in March and April are aromatic. Spicebush



is an exceptional alternative for a naturalizing shrub. It is an underutilized plant that may be difficult to find in the garden centers and plant nurseries.

Unlike most plants which normally have flowers with both male and female parts, Spicebush is **dioecious**, making individual plants either male or female. In autumn the female Spicebush plants bear bright red fruit.

(Photo of the mature Spicebush shrub is courtesy of the JC Raulston Arboretum in Raleigh. Photo of the female Spicebush is courtesy of Hollyn Anderson, Native Plants Unlimited.)

WILDLIFE PROFILES – Eastern Wild Turkey

The Eastern Wild Turkey thrives best with a mix of forested and open land habitats. The forested areas are used for cover, foraging and roosting in trees at night. The open land is used for foraging, mating and brood rearing. Wild Turkeys are omnivores, feeding mainly on nuts, berries, acorns, grasses, seeds and insects. Turkeys will also eat lizards and grubs.

Wild Turkeys were important to both the native Americans and early European settlers in America. By the middle of the 20th Century, only a few Wild Turkeys remained. Rapid deforestation, habitat destruction and over hunting led to a significant decline through the 1960's. In 1970 the North Carolina Wild Turkey population was only 2,000. Thanks to a restoration program implemented by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission, the statewide Wild Turkey population increased to 265,000 by 2015.

Although unregulated hunting was a problem in the past, hunters were the main group that helped restore turkey populations by funding restocking and relocating programs and contributing to groups that conserve habitats such as the National Wild Turkey Federation.

(Information and photo from the NC Wildlife Resources Commission.)



COUNTY FOREST RANGER - Ryan Searcy



Today's agricultural resource person is Ryan Searcy. Ryan is Polk County's Forest Ranger. He has been a ranger for 11 years and began his role locally in 2020. Prior to that he began his Forest Service career in Davie County.

Searcy is a native of Polk County, growing up in the Sunny View Community. His job responsibilities as county ranger pertain to most aspects of managing the forest resources. Wildfire is a serious threat to all forest tree species and the County Forest Ranger's primary function is to help control any wildfire incident in the county. In addition the ranger monitors insect and disease outbreaks on forest tree species. Ranger Searcy also works with private landowners to help properly manage their forest resources.

Polk's county ranger has always enjoyed working outdoors so being able to complete most of his work duties outside is perfect for him. "I love working in my home county and my career as county forest ranger is a dream come true."

Searcy is married to his wife Jessica. Together they have a teenage daughter and son. For fun Ryan loves to hunt and fish and spending time with his family.

POLK FFA PARTNERS WITH GARDENING FOR LIFE PROJECT

The Gardening For Life project is an all-volunteer community initiative that has been encouraging the use of native plant species in landscaping projects. In 2023 a special joint project called "Plugs For Pollinators" is being sponsored, getting PCHS students in the high school FFA program to begin growing native perennials from pre-sprouted seeds or "plugs".

The students planted the plant plugs in early October and are currently growing these native species inside the high school greenhouse. The plugs were donated by the Gardening For Life organization. The plan is to include these plants in the annual FFA spring plant sale in April. Those plants being grown are aster, blazing star, boneset, goldenrod, ironweed, mountain mint, phlox, rudbeckia, Joe-pye weed and two species of milkweed.

The Polk County students are tending these native perennials until the FFA Plant Sale later this spring.



MEET THE STAFF – Polk Soil & Water District

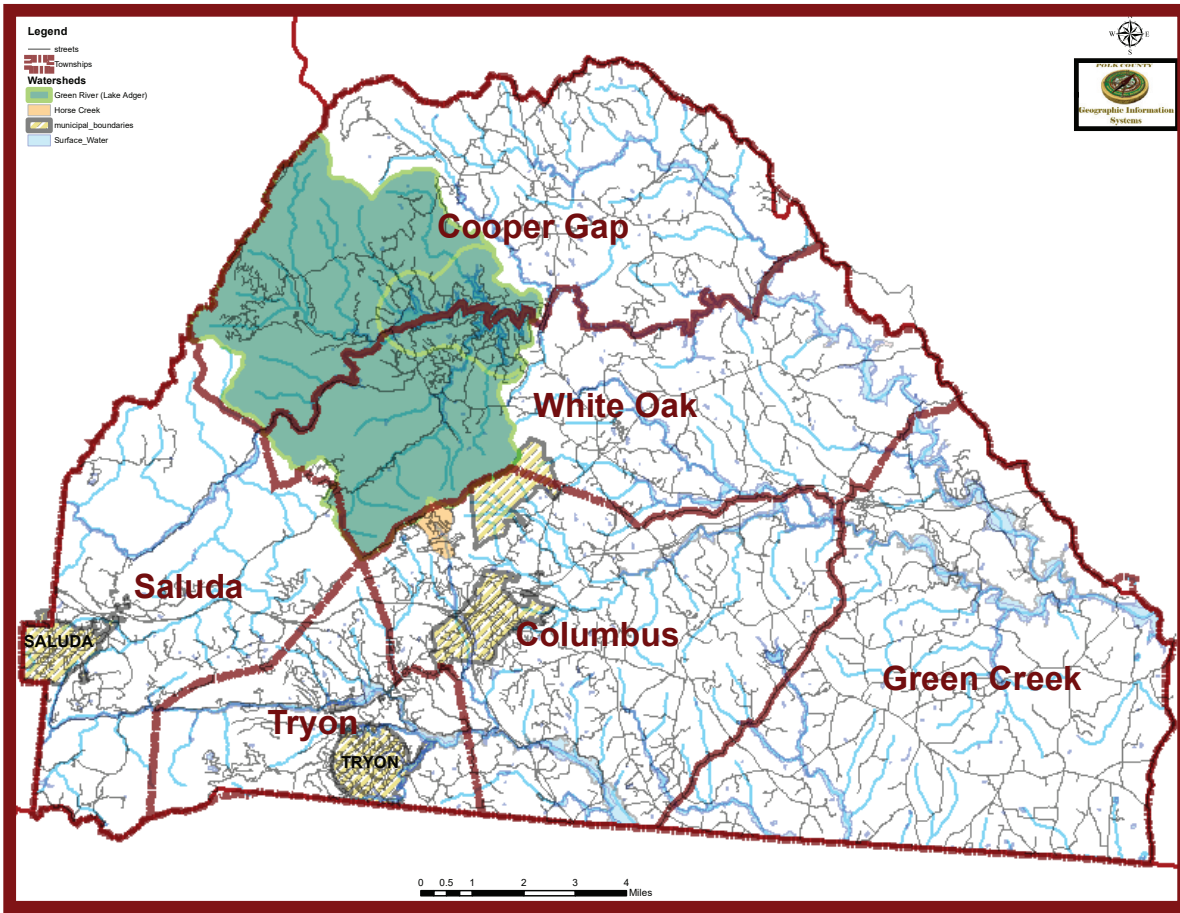
STUART WALKER -- Stuart Walker has been a fixture of the Polk Soil & Water Conservation District since 1989. His role in the department is that of Ag Technician. Walker manages the state cost share program for the county. He makes on-farm visits and helps advise the board as to which projects fit the criteria. swalker@polknc.org



KELLY GAY -- Kelly Gay is the program administrator for the Polk Soil & Water Conservation District. She has been a key staff member since 2017. Gay has a wide array of tasks in her role as administrator. In any given week she could be working with young people on the Soil & Water Envirothon, talking to county landowners about stream bank restoration or working on educational programs for the community at large. kgay@polknc.org

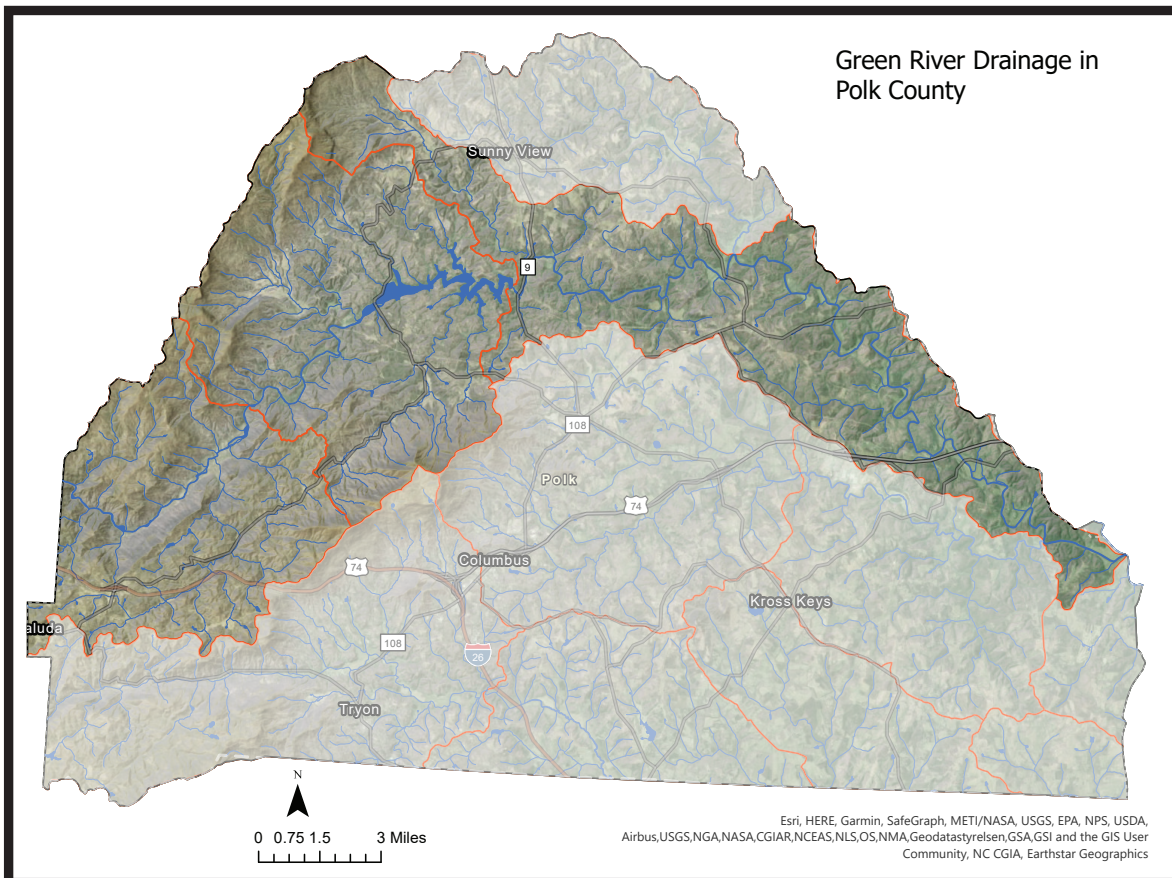
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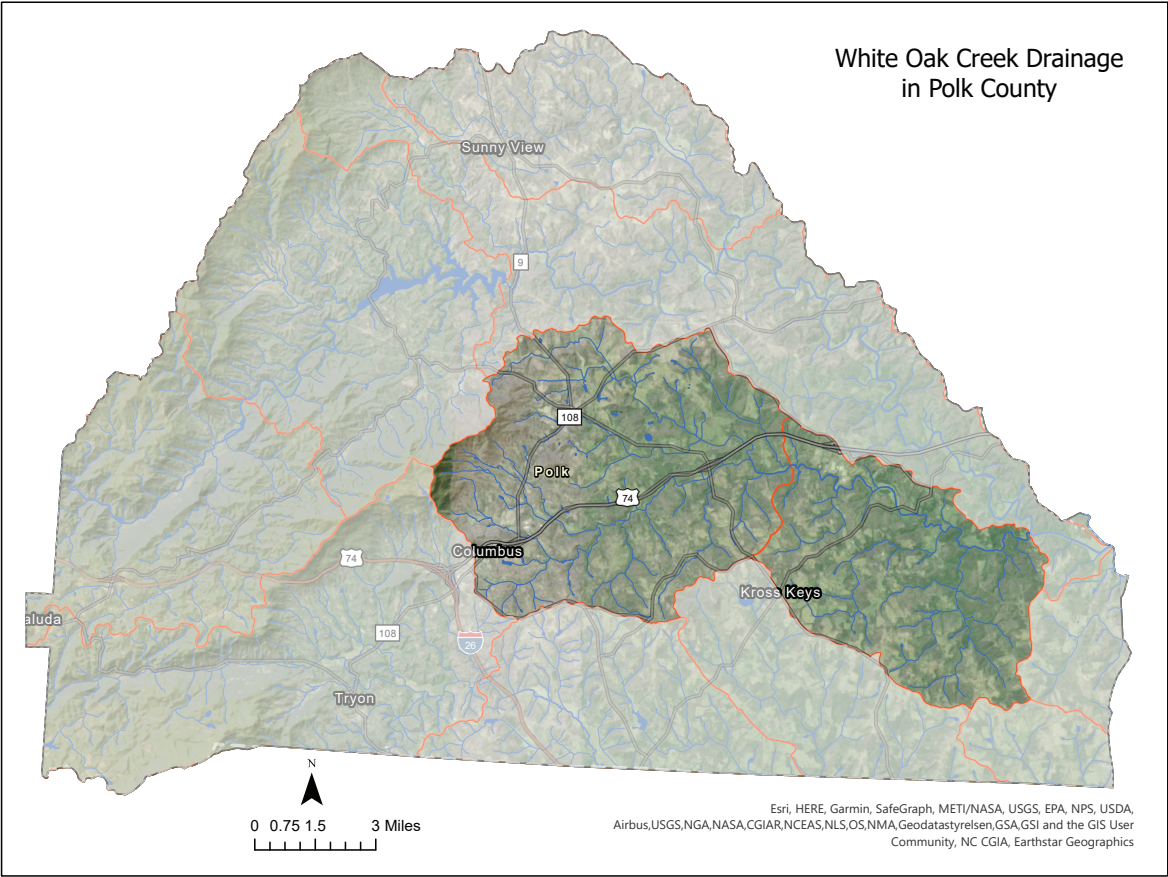
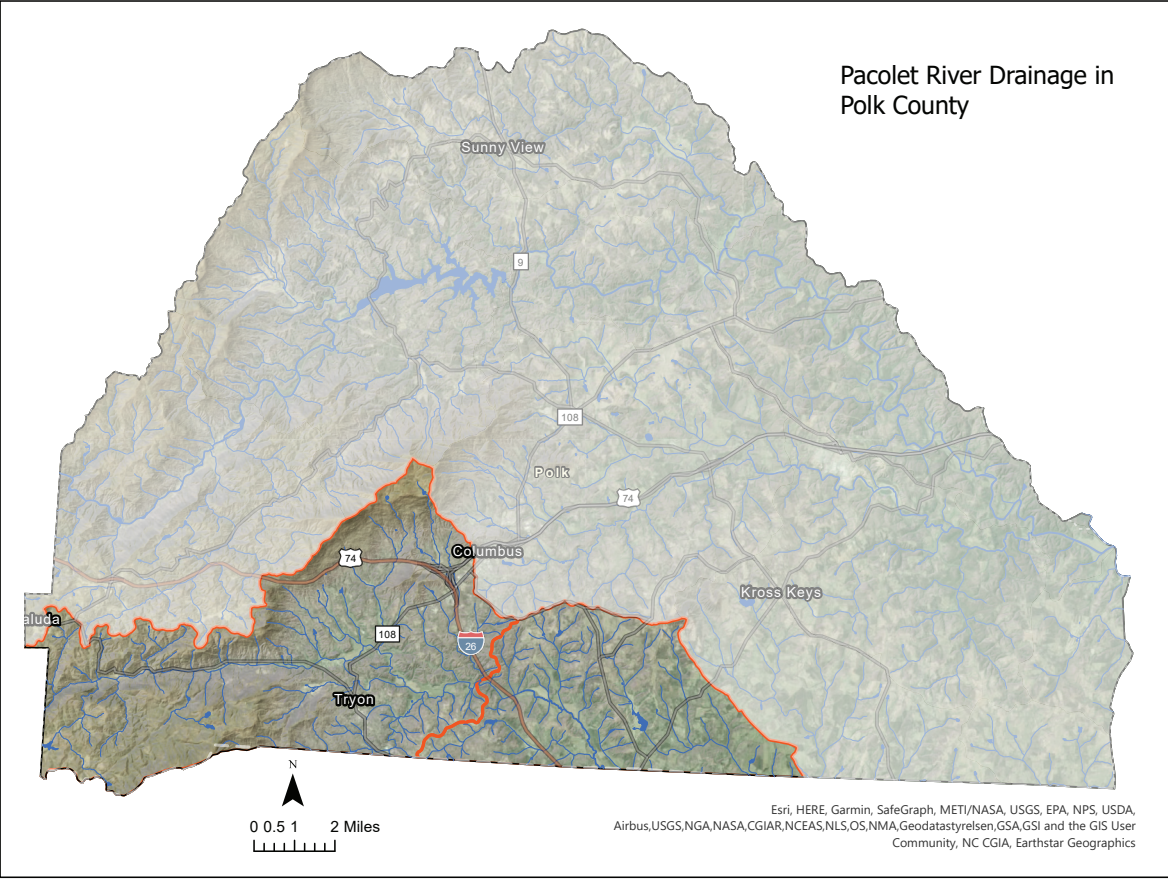
The Soil & Water Conservation District Office is located inside the former Mill Spring School on 156 School Road in Mill Spring, NC.



MAP OF POLK COUNTY

This graphic indicates the area in Polk County that is drained by the Green River and its tributaries.





Thanks to Karyl Fuller at Triangle J Council of Governments for her help with these drainage maps.

THE STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA FOREST TREE SEEDLING PROGRAM

North Carolina Tree Seedling Catalog

2023 - 2024

CONIFERS | HARDWOODS | NATIVE | CHRISTMAS | UNDERSTORY

Bareroot & Containers including

LOBLOLLY

3RD CYCLE | CMP | ADVANCED GENETICS

LONGLEAF

CONTAINERIZED | 1.5 GENERATION

WHITE PINE

IMPROVED

RED AND WHITE OAK SPECIES

TIMBER | WILDLIFE

EXOTIC AND NATIVE FIRS AND SPRUCES

DISEASE RESISTANT | MULTIPLE SPECIES

HEMLOCK

RESTORATION | EASTERN/CAROLINA



Since 1924 the North Carolina Forest Service has been actively involved in the production of native forest tree seedlings for the landowners of the state. The Forest Service's efforts are intended to provide a reliable supply of the best genetic selections at an affordable price.

Currently the state tree nurseries are producing 15 million seedlings annually. The nursery program produces enough seedlings to plant around 30,000 acres of land each year. The production is focused on tree species of high economic value such as loblolly pine, longleaf pine, shortleaf pine, eastern white pine and Atlantic white cedar. However, the total number of tree species grown is typically 40 different plant species.

In addition to providing a reliable tree seedling supply, the NC Forest Service is engaged in a Tree Improvement Program. Eight seed orchards are managed in five different locations across North Carolina. These orchards are used to produce seed with improved growth rates, increased disease resistance and have better growth characteristics. For example, the period of time needed to grow a mature stand of loblolly pine has been reduced from 45 to 50 years down to 30 to 35 years as a result of the genetic improvements made through the Tree Improvement Program.

For ordering information call 1-888-NCTREES (1-888-628-7337) or email seedlingcoordinator@ncagr.gov.

In 2021 the forest products industry contributed \$35.3 billion dollars to North Carolina's economy.

WHAT ARE BEECHDROPS?



If you take an autumn stroll through the woods where American Beech trees grow, you may observe an usual wildflower in bloom. Beechdrops consist of brownish stems with spiky clusters of cream colored, tube-shaped flowers. Frequently you may walk past these plants since they contain no chlorophyll and not particularly showy.

Beechdrops (*Epifagus virginiana*) are root parasites. In other words they actually derive their energy from the Beech trees. Beechdrops possess small root-like structures that insert directly into the Beech roots, drawing out enough nutrition to maintain the beechdrops. Because beechdrops are only growing in August through October, they do not damage the American Beech trees permanently.

(Photo courtesy of Helen Hamilton, past president of the John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society)

Earlier in this newsletter we mentioned that Spicebush is a dioecious plant. In nature only about 6 percent of the world's plants have their male flowers and female flowers on separate plants. Common dioecious plants found locally include muscadine grapes, American hollies and our native persimmon trees. Most plants are monoecious, or plants that have both male and female parts on the same plant.

NC Wild Turkey Fun Facts

- The wild turkey is found in 49 of the 50 United States and all of North Carolina's 100 counties.
- The life expectancy of a wild turkey is two years even though some turkeys have lived up to 10 years of age.
- Turkeys nest on the ground. In April and May the females will lay a clutch of 10 to 14 eggs.
- The average female turkey weighs 10 pounds and the male weighs 20 pounds.
- From the 1950's through 2005, over 6,000 wild turkeys were trapped and relocated to 358 different locations across North Carolina.
- In 2015 it was estimated that Polk County had 10 to 14 wild turkeys per square mile.

Information from the NC Wildlife Resources Commission

POLK SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION OFFICE IN MILL SPRING



The Polk County Soil & Water Conservation Office is located inside the Mill Spring Agricultural Center just off of NC Hwy 9. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 5pm. Because the local location is a field office, which means staff goes out and makes farm visits, frequently there is no one in the conservation office. Therefore call 894.8550 to determine if someone will be available at the time of your visit. Ask for Kelly or Stuart.

One can pick up information on programs offered, soil boxes for sampling and other ag related items. The street address is 156 School Road, Mill Spring.

This image shows the back entrance to the local conservation district office in Mill Spring.

Polk Soil & Water Conservation District
156 School Road, PO Box 455
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