Why plant conservation trees?

By Janet Lagler
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Early explorers described the Nebraska territory as the “Great American Desert,” without a tree to be seen in a day’s travel. The first settlers realized the value of trees. They planted millions of trees/shrubs on barren homesteads to help fulfill their basic needs for protection, building material, fuel, and food.

Planting trees quickly became a Nebraska tradition and Nebraska proudly became known as “The Tree Planter State.” Today, all Nebraskans benefit from the trees planted by our forefathers.

“The need for trees remains important today. The job is not finished,” said Dennis Adams, forester with the Nebraska Forest Service and University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension. Adams estimates that there is a need to annually plant about 6 million trees/shrubs for all conservation purposes in Nebraska, including:

• Energy Conservation. A good shelterbelt can reduce home heating and cooling costs by up to 30 percent.
• Crop Protection. A good field windbreak can increase average dry land crop yields up to 15 percent and may make the difference between a crop and no crop in a severe drought year.
• Livestock Protection. A well-designed livestock windbreak reduces stress on livestock, increases weight gain, and can decrease cattle mortality during severe winter storms.
• Wildlife Habitat. Trees and shrubs provide a diversity of cover, protection, and food to attract wildlife.
• Snow Control. Well-placed shelterbelts can minimize snow drifting on roads, driveways, and in farmsteads, or distribute snow more evenly over fields.
• Soil Conservation. Well-designed field windbreaks help prevent wind erosion of soil on bare cropland.
• Water Quality. A cover of trees and shrubs minimizes soil erosion, stabilizes stream banks in riparian areas, and removes soil contaminants.
• Wood Products. As trees grow they provide valuable firewood, lumber, biomass and other valuable wood products.
• Food. Many trees and shrubs are a valuable source of fruit and nuts for humans and animals.

“Often trees and shrubs planted for one specific conservation purpose also provide additional benefits,” Adams said. “For example, a shelterbelt planted primarily to prevent snow drifting in the farmstead driveway also reduces energy costs, attracts wildlife, and adds beauty as extra benefits.”

The Nebraska Conservation Trees Initiative Partnership is a consortium of local, state and federal agencies that includes: Nebraska’s natural resources districts, the Nebraska Association of Resources Districts, the Nebraska Forest Service, the Nebraska Department of Agriculture,

and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, USDA Forest Service, and USDA Farm Service Agency. To learn more visit http://www.nrdtrees.org