

WAKEFIELD TOWNSHIP- John Niemela is proud of his garden. All 320 acres of it. Niemela, of Wakefield, owns a vast section of forest in Wakefield Township and has recently won the Upper Peninsula Tree Farmer of the Year award from the American Tree Farm System; the award also puts him in the running for a state-wide prize. His wife, Kristine, shares in the award. According to Rexx Janowiak, group manager with the Green Timber Tree Farm Group, the farm system includes 26 million acres owned by 60,000 landowners across the nation. Niemela said he has owned the property for more than 25 years, and, with the help of close family and friends, has spent that entire time investing in the land and maintaining it for wildlife, business and recreation alike. "It's like having a big vegetable garden," Niemela said. "It's been 25 years of hard work... I never did it for the recognition." Niemela's property was eligible for the award because he has maintained it as a certified family forest, which requires he adhere to a strict management plan and meet high environmental standards. In example, he said he recently had a timber sale, and he specifically planted hemlock trees in place of the trees harvested to improve biodiversity and benefit wildlife. "Hemlock provides cover to deer," Niemela said, explaining the trees help them survive the winter. "It's actually five degrees warmer under hemlock." Throughout his property, he said he has created ponds and grows plants, like hazelnut and cranberry bushes, to provide sustenance to the animals, which draws friendly and dangerous wildlife alike; he has seen wolves, bears, and even recently saw his dog injured by a porcupine. Despite the difficulty and occasional dangers of maintaining the property, Niemela speaks only reverently of it. "I don't ever want to do anything else," Niemela said while sitting in a cabin he and his family built on top of the property, which is so high up that geese struggle to climb above nearby trees. From his cabin, Niemela can look over a vista including Lake Superior and numerous mountains. Niemela said he built the cabin to honor his lifelong friend, the late Ron Lake, who died three years ago from a stroke; Niemela is still saddened by his sudden and all-too-early passing. "Ronnie always asked, "Why don't you build a nice camp?" Niemela said, and that's what he did. Niemela said Lake, a former manager of the Connor Land and Lumber Company, shared a "mutual love of the outdoors" with him, and the two grew up on the property. He credits Lake with pushing him into maintaining a certified family forest, and is determined to see the property stay in his family. "I have no interest in selling it," Niemela said, adding that he is using timber sales to make sure the property pays for itself, so he can pass it on to his children one day without it being a burden. "We've put everything we have into this," Niemela said, adding that any money he raises from the property is reinvested into it. With so much land held to such high standards, Niemela said Green Timber Consulting Foresters,

Inc. has been vital in not only maintaining the property, but harvesting timber for good prices. "Selling wood is like dealing with used-car salesmen," Niemela said, adding he advised anyone trying to sell large quantities of timber to use a consulting service. Though Niemela said he will likely attend a ceremony in Sault Ste. Marie in the coming weeks to receive his award, he said it feels a little like "getting an award for getting out of bed and taking a breath." Niemela said he will just continue improving and enjoying his land, whether through hunting, making homemade maple syrup, or just enjoying the peace and quiet with family and friends. He said he plans to live in his camp once he retires. Whether Niemela's forest wins more accolades or not, he has already reaped its greatest harvest: the deep roots of lifelong friendship and branches that embrace new generations.

\*\*\* Jon Hawley, Ironwood Daily Globe  
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