



2022 Kittson County SWCD Rural Beautification Award Winners

John and Nancy Webster

The Kittson Soil and Water Conservation District awards John and Nancy Webster of Svea Township the 2022 Rural Beautification Award. They were chosen by the Kittson SWCD Board of Supervisors for their large fertile gardens and long-established tree rows.

Their home is located south of Kennedy, in Svea Township. John moved here with his family in 1952 at the age of 2 and has lived here since. His wife Nancy grew up in Stephen, MN. and moved to the farm in 1980, after meeting John while working at American Crystal in Drayton. The farm is their “little slice of heaven” as John puts it.

John and Nancy love the outdoors and gardening. They have two gardens on their farm, one just north of the house and the other, even larger garden, in the northwest corner of their property. The garden

just north of their house is teasingly referred to as “Nancy’s Garden” by John. They brought in 120 yards of topsoil from the Halma Strata Gravel Pits to amend the heavy clay soil. Nancy’s garden grows strawberries, raspberries, cantaloupe, tomatoes, cucumbers, orange peppers, yellow peppers, jalapeno peppers, marigolds, peonies, peas, carrots, green beans, potatoes, lettuce, cabbage, red beets, garlic, onions, rhubarb, and grapes. They have four grape vines growing on trellises in the garden. Two of the vines are twenty-year-old table grapes. The other two are about 6 years old. One is a table grape and the other is a seedless grape. Nancy uses them to make her own grape jelly.

When John retired 6 years ago, the garden projects expanded, he says it gives him something to focus on. About three years ago, they began donating their extra produce in Lake Bronson and currently send their produce to the Cornerstone Food Pantry in Hallock. When they have extra, they even bring some to the Crookston Police Department, where their son works as an IT professional. They like to “share the bounty” as they put it.

In their second garden, they plant corn, onions, cucumbers, honeydew melon, watermelon, buttercup squash, spaghetti squash, pumpkins, tomatoes, peppers, rhubarb, potatoes, and red beets. The honeydew and watermelon are new additions this year and they’re hoping they produce well. Nancy added a wildflower mix because she likes the surprise of what comes up and the variety of colors. The second garden is a heavy gumbo clay with no added soil, so it gets very sticky when wet. John had to plant corn just after the soil started to crust up this year, because it was such a wet spring and it rained as soon as they finished. They usually no till their corn but on extremely wet years, like this, they cultivate before planting. They like to plant sweet corn with a few different growing times, so they produce sweet corn longer. They usually have sweet corn for about 6 weeks in the summer. They also have hyssop or honeyberries planted. These berries are like blue berries and are closely related to honeysuckle. The first berries usually pop up around the 3rd week of June. Nancy says, “it’s usually a race between the birds and us to see who gets there first”.

Between the two Gardens Nancy and John have an abundance of produce. John says they donated around 2,000 lbs of fresh food last year. At least 800 lbs of that was potatoes. The potatoes, carrots, and green beans grow so well that they said, “the food pantry must be sick of them.” Their garden produced eight-to-ten-pound cantaloups last year. They added spent lime to the soil and they say that seems to help them grow.

In addition to the bountiful gardens, John and Nancy have surrounded the property with tree rows. The north and west tree rows were planted with assistance from the Kittson SWCD. The Eastern and Southern rows were planted by John and Nancy themselves.

They established a row of cottonwoods on the west side when they were first married. In 2012, they planted over 1,000 trees with the District’s tree planter including chokecherry, black hills spruce, quaking aspen, apricot, flame willow, and redosier dogwood. Since then, they have planted silver maples and allowed volunteer green ash and box elder to grow creating more variety. Over the years they’ve purchased over 1,200 trees from the Kittson SWCD including white spruce, black chokeberry, amur maple, silver maple, american plum, and hackberry trees.

The southern tree row continues up the eastern side of their property. 40 years ago, just after they were married, they planted green ash and white spruce. About 15 years ago, they planted more than 300 trees of different varieties in the mud just the two of them, because it was an extremely wet year. Nancy

says they planted them helter-skelter and mixed shades and colors. The result is a natural grove of trees and native bushes. They've planted silver maples, cottonwoods, elms, willows, lindens, dogwoods, highbush cranberries, current bushes, and lilac bushes. When visiting, the Webster's oldest grandson told Grandma, "Gee, we're in the forest." It certainly seems that way under the cool green shade of hundreds of trees.

With all the sheltering trees, their property is the perfect habitat for wildlife. Over the years they've seen songbirds, coyotes, timber wolves, fox, ducks, racoons, skunk, jack rabbits, and deer. As we walk through their yard bird songs fill the air. Nancy says she's seen blue bunting, rose breasted grosbeak, gold finch, blue jays, baltimore orioles, hummingbirds, and western and eastern king birds visiting their feeders and nesting in their trees. Three winters ago, they had 20 sharp tailed grouse rousting in their flowering crab apple trees. They liked the shelter of the windbreaks and eating the berries from the crab apples and were even bold enough to come up to the house on occasion. The grouse population has come back in the past 10 years, John credits the CRP and sunflower fields that provide them food and shelter. They love the Webster's property because of the protection the trees provide from the wind. Last year a fox, probably a yearling, wandered across their yard and came to investigate their bird feeders. They were pleased to see him, since mange had decreased the population in the area. Early in the spring, beehives are placed around their property and their tree rows are a popular source of food for them.

The wildlife aren't the only ones who love this sheltered oasis. John and Nancy love their home where they raised three children, two sons and a daughter. Their children grew up helping on the farm and tending the garden. All three children have gardens of their own and continue the family tradition of tending the land. They have four grandchildren under the age of seven with two more little ones on the way. When out at Grandma and Grandpa's house, the grandkids have fun helping in the garden. They like to collect the carrots, dropped buckeyes, and sometimes worms. Their homestead has hosted four generations of their family and Nancy says "It's a wonderful place to raise children."

This wonderful family home with large established trees of every possible variety and two huge abundant gardens is full of love and life. It is a beautiful testament to the hardworking generous people who call it home. The Kittson SWCD wants to thank the Websters for welcoming us and graciously accepting this award for their accomplishments.



Figure 1 Nancy's vegetable and flower garden.



Figure 2 Aerial view of the Webster's home and Nancy's Garden.



Figure 3 Aerial view of the Webster's Farm from the North.