This easy project will take only two hours of your time and cost about $25.

Winter building

ENJOY GETTING "LEOPOLD BENCHED."

Story and photos by Natasha Kassulke

They keep popping up — funny-looking gray benches with backrests that defy the vertical plane. First they were sprouting at the farm, then in our family's backyards and the community garden.

In fact, people all over the world are using and resting on their laurels on simple but sturdy Aldo Leopold benches.

I suppose it makes sense. Even the famed conservationist had to sit and rest once in a while. In fact, historians like to tell the tale that Leopold would sit outside on his hand-built bench on his land near Baraboo and write about what he saw, heard and prognosticated for the future.

The bench is just the right size for Cory and Dylan Layton of Madison.

According to the Aldo Leopold Foundation, there is no one correct bench design. Leopold never wrote down his plans for them.

My crafty brother-in-law has made many Leopold benches and when I went to take a picture of one recently at his house, his wife pulled me to the side to warn, "I'm not sure that's the photo you want. He doesn't really follow the directions."

But that's OK. The beauty of the bench is that you can make it your own. And just as — if not equally — important to the design is the place you choose to put your bench.

My favorite spot is under the tree at the farm overlooking the garden. It's a shady spot that seems to attract the more senior "work supervisors" in the family. As I toil in the sun in the garden, they like to settle on the bench to point out the weeds I've missed — but also to savor the bird calls and butterflies just as Leopold did not too many miles away on his own bench.

Thankfully, instructions for building an Aldo Leopold bench are easy to come by online. I found helpful instructions from the Environmental Protection Agency website (archive.epa.gov/greenacres/web/html/wo27bench.html). The project is easy — a fine winter workout for those like me with little carpentry experience. Supplies are inexpensive and can be purchased for about $25. Time to build clocks in at two hours, on average.

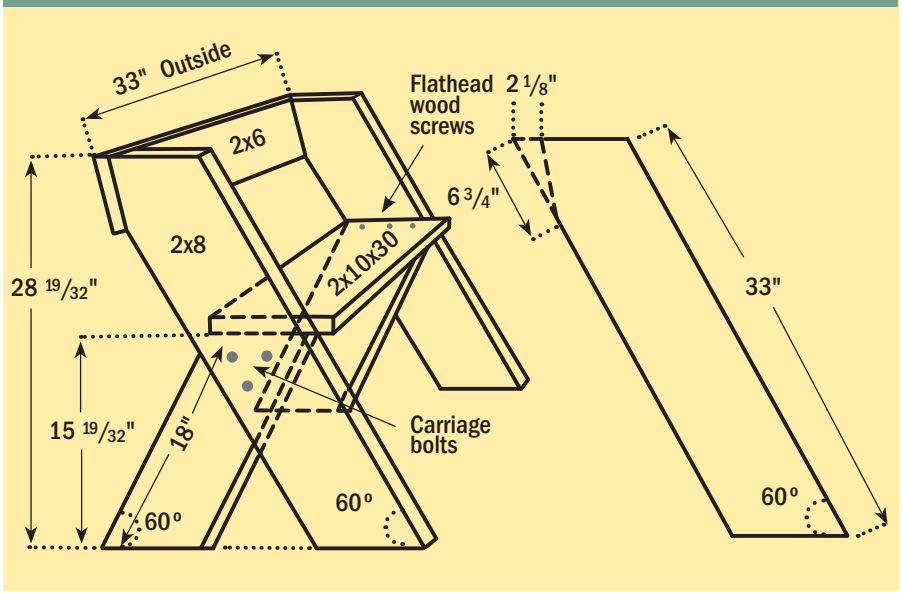
The materials listed on EPA's site include: one 2x6x33-inch board, one 2x10x30-inch board, one 2x8x10-foot board, six 3/8-inch x 3 1/2-inch carriage bolts with washer and nut, 12 3/8-inch x 3 1/2-inch #12 or #14 flathead wood screws. It's suggested to use Douglas fir for your Leopold bench. The materials listed will make a 33-inch bench, but you may choose to build out to 48 inches.

Another helpful site from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Agricultural Education Program includes a design and instructions by Julie Niemerg (aged.illinois.edu/sites/aged.illinois.edu/files/resources/AGM%20Leopold%20Bench.pdf).

People modify the angle of the back rest. Some like the benches to be wider. But no matter the size, no matter the space, "To spy a Leopold bench in someone's yard is to know something about the family who there resides," the EPA website suggests.

Natasha Kassulke writes from Madison. She did earn an "A" in her elementary school shop class.

ASSEMBLY DIAGRAM FOR TYPICAL LEOPOLD BENCH



THOMAS SENATORI (ADAPTED FROM USEPA DRAWING)