

The origin and observance of Soil Stewardship Week

At a time when pressures grow on the land, it is useful to remind ourselves of the origins and history of the Soil Stewardship observance. They stress the allegiance of all men to God and their dependence on His grace for all good things.

Throughout the ages, men have offered humble thanks to their Creator for the priceless gifts of air, soil, water, and sunshine which make all living things possible.

The custom of setting aside special days---Rogation Days---for this purpose began more than 1,500 years ago in the neighborhood of Vienne, France. Bad weather and earthquakes had brought crop failures and widespread hunger. The Bishop of Vienne called for prayer and penance on the three days preceding Ascension Day. The people responded and implored God for help in their suffering and privation.

Word of what had happened in Vienne spread throughout France and then to other countries. The supplication filled a need in the hearts and minds of the people, and as the years went by, Rogation Days were widely observed as an annual custom. By the end of the eighth century, the church formally adopted the custom. Now, the world over, people on Rogation Days beg the mercy of God and ask that He spare His children the evils of soul and body – and give good increase to the plants of the field.

In our own land it has met an evident need of the people to set aside a week each year to acknowledge before God our gratitude for His gifts of soil and all the bountiful resources associated with it. The week has become a special time to remind people that these gifts warrant their best in Christian stewardship.

In America, the soil stewardship observance has always traced its origin to the Rogation Days. Throughout parts of the South, earlier in this century, churches and their congregations began to set aside the fifth Sunday after Easter as Soil and Soul Sunday.

Subsequently, this became Soil Stewardship Sunday when, in 1946, the publishers of Farm and Ranch magazine suggested to religious leaders in a few southern states that one Sunday be set aside each year to remind their congregations of man's duty to be a steward of the land.

The response of clergymen and laymen was so warm and widespread that observance of Soil and Stewardship Sunday spread steadily to additional states. In 1954, the publishers of the magazine suggested to the officers of the National Association of Conservation Districts that a still wider observance of Soil Stewardship Sunday could aid significantly in bringing about a national awakening and recognition of man's obligations to the Lord's earth. The publishers offered to relinquish their limited sponsorship of Soil Stewardship Sunday to the Association – which represents some 3,000 local soil and water conservation district organizations throughout America.

The Association accepted, and beginning in 1955 undertook to encourage a nation-wide observance – a mission to which it has dedicated itself ever since, under the guidance of a special Soil Stewardship Advisory Committee of clergymen representing many of the country's religious denominations. In 1956, recognizing possible conflicts with the observance of Rural Life Sunday, which was on the calendar of many churches, Soil Stewardship Sunday was changed to Soil Stewardship Week – beginning with the fifth Sunday after Easter and continuing through the sixth.