Efficient Fire-wood Harvesting

by Richard R. Doucet

WANT a good supply of quality firewood with low cash expenditure? Want more time to get other homestead chores done? Want some good exercise, but not endless hours of backbreaking work? Care about the area you're going to harvest and don't want to scar it up with heavy equipment?

You can accomplish all of these aims in one stroke - if you know the "magic word". That word? Efficiency!

A firewood harvesting foray can yield a far greater amount of product than would normally be expected in the same amount of time when you use efficient planning, preparation and execution.

There is really no problem in locating stands or areas of poten tial firewood. They are usually too small to warrant commercial attention or too difficult to reach without heavy equipment. Perfect for you to obtain, for no cash cost and perhaps only an exchange of "logging rights", a small share of the wood. For this reason I wont go into where to find wood.

I have a 15-acre homestead abutting a 47-acre lot. My neighbor, who has just built a log home on the front of that lot, allowed beavers to set up housekeeping about 3 years ago. The pond they created effectively cut access to the back 80 percent of the lot, making it impossible for her to cut firewood without crossing my property, and even then only with a great deal of difficulty because of the terrain.

The beavers, on the other hand, had no trouble reaching and cutting trees at all. Given the taste beavers have for the better quality trees, it was not long before an amazing abundance of large oaks, birches, poplar and beech trees lay in disarray in the area. Even more trees stood, dead, from having been girdled by the beavers or drowned by the rising water.

We both wanted the estimated 10 to 12 cord of wood that could be extracted from the area, but we also know the devastation loggers would cause if we had them do it. And, of course, it would not be cheap. Therefore, we settled on a simple exchange of part of the harvest for her if I could get it out.

With the aforementioned in mind, I hasten to add that this article is not a review of proper safety procedures for wood cutting. Anyone planning to do any work with a chain saw, power splitter or any hand tool such as an axe or buck saw should be

completely knowledgeable in the safe use and operation of these tools. Extensive instruction and safety tips are included with any power or hand tool you purchase. I can give you no better advice than to tell you to study and understand the instructions for any equipment you intend to use.

However, I will make these few points. By our very nature those of us who seek the more self-sufficient way of life, often tend to work alone. Sometimes because we want to and other times because we have to. While it is never a good idea to work in the woods alone, especially with power tools, if you decide to, then I strongly suggest you do the following:

- If there is any chance of having someone around for a period of time get as much power tool work done as possible, especially chain saw work.

- Have a first aid kit with you. Even a simple one with com press bandages can save your life.

- Have a CB radio, whistle or "fog horn" (the kind carried on small boats and powered by a can of compressed air) as a means of signaling for help.

- Last, but not least, THINK SAFETY AT ALL TIMES.

Frugal is a word we do not hear much these days, but its meaning is not lost on homesteaders. Keep it in mind as you choose your tools for the task. When it come to large items, such as a chain saw, borrow it if you do not need it for more than this one task. You can easily be sold a lot of expensive doodads and "need-to-have" stuff that you can really do without. Some of it can be very expensive, such as a wood splitter; nice to look at and does a fast job, but considerable money to spend for two or three day's worth of work, only to be stored for the rest of the year.

You can do a reasonably fast and "effort acceptable" job with only these items: safety glasses, gloves, ear protection, small hatchet or machete, splitting wedge, maul, chain saw with acces sories, and a "measuring stick." you can quickly and easily make yourself a measuring stick. It will save you time and maybe some aggravation.

Cut a pole about four feet long and about an inch or so in diameter and clean it up by taking all the branches and bark off. Then decide how long your split wood has to be to fit your stove, its "stove length".

For example, my stove takes 24 inch logs so I cut my logs to 20

inches... just to make sure they fit. I marked off my stick at 20 inches and 40 inches, making sure the handle end was indicated. Use bright yellow or orange paint or tape for this. Using this stick, you can quickly measure off multiples of correct stove lengths and mark them on the logs with your hatchet.

When To Cut - Pick your season for wood cutting. In my area, southern New Hampshire, the best times of year are mid-to-late spring and mid-to-late autumn. During these times of the year the weather may still be unpredictable, but usually it's good. In the spring, the leaves and fast growing ferns and grasses have not yet sprung up to make work difficult. In the fall, especially after the first good frost, grasses and ferns have died back and many leaves are off the trees. But, best of all, there are almost no insects around!

By the time one of these two seasons rolls around, you should have already accomplished the next step - reconnaissance

Whether the areas you will "log" is on or near your property or further away, this is a step that is most important. By choosing the area in the first place, you have already decided that it is worth the time and effort to travel the distance involved to get the wood.

On your reconnaissance you should make the following notes:

- How far from your transportation do you want to walk to a logging area?

- In that area, how much "dry" wood is available (including cut and left by loggers, standing dead or hangers)?

- How much green wood is there?

Make a sketch of where and how you will set up your work site, Mark the various stations. Setting up the work site is next. You may elect to do it days before you start to cut or do it first day of cutting. The important thing to remember is that next to safety, efficiency is most important; so take the time to set up

The logging area and the work site are set up so that wood flows in one direction and is handled as few times as possible. Clear your work sits of grass, ferns, loose stones, and dead wood that is in the way. The same is true for your walkways in the work site and throughout the logging area. You will be carrying some good sized logs and the painful consequences of tripping over something will be greatly increased with the weight of a log in your arms or on your shoulder. Pay particular attention to

special dangers.

Closest to the transport should be the splitting area. When the wood is split, it can be tossed directly into the transport. This is also the best place to leave items such as fuel, tools, bar oil, lunch and refreshments. A note here: alcoholic beverages of any kind have no place when you are doing this type of work.

Next to the splitting area, set up two "bucking stands". Both stands serve the same purpose: to produce multiple stove length pieces in a single cut and thus making the most efficient use of time and energy.

Though each stand is made differently, there is one thing about their construction they have in common that is very important. The width of the stands MUST be a few inches shorter than the length of the bar on your chain saw.

If this width is greater than the bar length, the saw will "tip" on the log farthest out and cause the saw to kick back at you. Both stands are used at the same time. The pre-built one holds smaller logs or branches, and you can put as many in as the stand will hold. However, with the field-built stand relative diameters are important. Putting a much smaller log on the out side, or farthest from you, with a larger log closer is not safe, because the chain of the saw can pull the smaller one over the larger one, hitting you quite hard. Basically, use the pre-built stand for logs and branches less than 4 inches and the field-built one for over 4 inches in diameter.

On the opposite side of the splitting area, find a space for "uglies." Uglies are what I call short leftovers and pieces too hard to split, such as knots and forks. As I measure up logs for cutting, I usually cut around these and leave them behind. This way, when it is time to split, I do not have a fight on my hands. I save the uglies to burn during the day when I can tend the fire... "Waste knot, want knot."

The last areas to set up are the stacking areas. This is noth ing more than a cleared area. As you bring your wood in, you fill the bucking stands first, then stack up the rest. Now you are ready to start. You arrive early on a nice sunny day and are ready to go. Stop! Take time to finish your coffee Now is the time to answer the most important question of the day: "How much can I really get done in the time I have set aside?" Your goal should be to get everything you cut home at the end of the time you have

Now you are ready to start cutting. Cut the trees in the fol

lowing order:

- Downed trees, green and dead.
- Hangers and leaners (be careful).
- Standing dead trees.
- Standing green trees.

Work from a point closest to your work site outward to the farthest point you will want to go. Do all the like work at once. Cut down trees. Limb all the trees. Mark off all the trees in stove lengths with the help of your measuring stick. Cut all the logs to carrying length.

If you can lift 100 pounds, do not try to carry logs any heavier than about 50 pounds. Not only will you get tired faster trying to carry your best load and risk a lifting injury, but the chance of a serious injury is much greater if you fall with 100 pounds on your shoulder.

When cutting the logs, cut in multiples of the stove length marks you made. The shortest log will be one of one stove length. If this is still too heavy, you will have to split it in half. As you work up the trunk of the tree, the diameter will get smaller and you will be able to carry logs of two and then three stove lengths.

The maximum length you should carry is not more than about 8 feet. Beyond this length, they became very clumsy to handle and difficult to walk with through the woods. When you get to diame ters of about 4 inches and less there is no need to mark them. Your 2 x 4 bucking stand will do that for you.

Splitting - Once all the cutting is done, the next chore is to get them to the work site. Just as with the other work, there is a best order to work in:

- The heaviest and farthest away.
- The farthest away for like sizes.
- The uglies.

By working from the farthest point with the heaviest ones first, you achieve several goals. First, the heaviest are most likely to be the single stove lengths and these can go straight to the splitting area. They will be out of your way from the logging area first and ready to be split at the work site first. More important, you will move the heaviest the farthest when you are still rested and strongest. As the day goes on you will begin to tire, but the difficulty of the work will lessen with the de crease in your energy level... a definite psychological advan

tage. Last to be brought in and loaded are the uglies. They are the smallest and represent the least valuable of the wood. If some one shows up to help, like the children after school, these small pieces will be easy for them to handle and give them some thing useful to do. However, should time run short, you can always leave the uglies behind.

Now, all the work will be done in the work site. What you have accomplished so far should have taken about 2/3 of the time you have to complete the task.

Continuing the theory of getting the most energy consuming tasks finished first, the next step is to split the stove length logs, and load them as you split. Use the field-build stand to cut the multiple length logs and split and load them. Lastly, cut the smallest diameter logs in the 2 x 4 stand. Each cut here will give you armloads of smaller diameter lengths that will not need splitting. Once these are loaded, just throw on the uglies.

Before you leave though, you may want to consider one of those nice, straight, tall, but very dead pines. Cut into rounds about a foot long, they split very nicely into kindling. Load your tools and any trash in the area... even if it is not yours.

You have gotten your wood home in the time you set aside. Done? Not yet! Follow through on the last task storage.

You went through a lot of trouble and work to get this wood so take care of it until you use it. There are many methods of storing wood, but keep these characteristics in mind as you plan to store:

- Try to store it out of the weather.
- Separate the green from the seasoned and the bone dry.
- Don't store it too far from the house... remember, you have to get to it in the dead of winter.

Use the bone dry early in the season. It will burn faster, but chances are you will need it mostly for getting "the chill out" more than serious heating. Stone the green wood in ricks one stove length wide, about four feet high as long as you like. Run the ricks east and west. Wrap the sides and ends in clear or black plastic, but not the top.

Put scrap boards or plywood on top, held down by rocks or logs. On sunny, winter days the plastic will cause a greenhouse effect and help dry the wood. The moisture will be able to escape through the top. By early spring it should be ready to use.

Now you can sit back and have that cup of herbal tea or dip into that cider barrel.

You have efficiently, at little cash expense, brought yourself closer to self sufficiency using what others did not want. You have not harmed the environment in the process, and have gotten a good physical workout that others pay big money for at a spa. Not bad for a day's work! Be proud of yourself and sleep well to night.

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