

## Rural Landscaping

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### **Improving Mother Nature's designs**

When we moved to our rural Ozark property, I vowed that whatever landscaping we did would be something I could maintain from the back of a riding mower. I am more interested in wandering through the woods and watching the wild critters than fiddling with gardening. I've been fairly successful at keeping that vow. Unfortunately that also means I spend many hours on my mower in the spring and fall.

The term "Rural Landscaping" must seem like an oxymoron. Landscaping is something you do with city property. Rural property shouldn't need it, should it?

Truthfully, most rural landscaping is done with a Brush Hog – a tractor mounted rough mower used for clearing fields. Some folks mow everything with a trunk smaller than 4 inches in diameter. That is typical farm landscaping.

Most of us retired folks are more interested in enjoying nature than keeping an eye on a commercial farm operation. We prefer to be a little more selective in how we deal with the foliage on our land. Native trees and bushes are usually more scenic than bare ground.

With care, low maintenance landscaping is easy to produce. The trick to it is not doing too much too fast. For the most part, the lowest maintenance landscaping is natural landscaping. Ninety percent of natural landscaping is simply clearing out dead stuff. The other ten percent is in the artful trimming back of what is left.

An additional aspect of rural landscaping is the impact it can have on the local wildlife habitat. Your presence will affect wildlife. Adding a reliable water source, food

sources, or shelter can improve the wildlife habitat. However, clearing underbrush removes protective cover discouraging wildlife. How much and what kind of interaction you will have with the local wildlife depends quite a lot on your landscaping choices. Check with the state conservation agency in the state where you will be living for recommendations.

## **Fire protection**

The most important part of rural landscaping is fire protection. This not a common concern for urban or suburban people. It is something that people often overlook when moving to a rural setting. Rural areas are typically served by small volunteer fire departments. Response time to calls for help can be very long. In the case of a large wildland fire, you may be on your own.

Establishing a good firebreak is the first step for fire protection. Ideally, this would be creating a two hundred foot wide non-flammable border around your house and outbuildings. At a minimum, your firebreak should provide at least fifty feet isolation from heavy flammable foliage. Some western states require a minimum of one hundred feet.

Your rural residential firebreak does not have to be bare ground. It may simply be mowed lawn or grass. Decorative shrubs can become a fire hazard if they can become dry and flammable during fire season so add them with caution.

There are additional fire protection steps available to you. Don't stack lumber or firewood against your house or outbuildings. In areas with frequent periods of high fire danger, sprinklers can be installed to wet down the area around your house when a fire is approaching. Brush and trees beyond your firebreak can be thinned to reduce heat buildup as a fire approaches.

Contact your local rural fire department for additional advice. All fire departments provide free fire prevention information and, as time allows, will visit your property and recommend improvements to your fire protection efforts if needed.

## **Removing trees**

Most of us who elect to retire to rural areas prefer to leave most of the trees on our property standing. Usually though, some trees have to be removed. Trees on building sites and driveway routes have to be cleared. Dead and sick trees that might fall onto future structures and driveway must be removed.

Consider leaving some trees around your house for summer shade. Only strong healthy trees should be left for this purpose. When selecting trees to be left for shade, it is best to choose those that do not lean in the direction of any structures. Construction activities around the base of trees compacts the soil, smothering and killing their roots. It is much safer and easier to remove a dying tree if it leans away from your house.

Shade trees normally have their lower limbs removed so are not a major fire hazard. In coniferous forests where fires potentially travel in treetops, make sure there is space between your shade trees and the surrounding forest canopy.

For most of us in the Midwestern hardwood forests, where trees are seldom more than 36 inches in diameter, the easiest way to take trees down is to have them pushed over. This can be done either with a dozer or a backhoe. A dozer pushes a tree over by lifting its blade or bucket high for leverage. A backhoe sets its outriggers for stability and reaches high on the tree and pushes with its hoe. Pushing a tree over has the advantage that the tractor has good control of the fall direction plus the tree's trunk and root ball are dislodged from the ground.

When clearing trees with a chainsaw, leave at least four feet of trunk if you will be removing a stump at some later date. That will leave enough of the trunk for a dozer to lever it out of the ground. A backhoe will have to dig the stump out, as even four feet is not enough leverage for most machines. I'll cover the subject of chainsaws and tree felling in more detail in the chapter on firewood.

Trees, like people, are subject to disease and old age. The average lifespan of a tree varies with species and local conditions. If you have trees on your property, you should learn to recognize unhealthy trees. Diseased and damaged trees can be a hazard as they can be weak and break or fall over unexpectedly. Unhealthy trees should be removed if any part of the tree can fall where people, vehicles, or structures could be damaged.

While all the various species of trees on our property are subject to disease and damage, our biggest problem here in the Ozarks is with the species that is called a Blackjack Oak. This is scraggly looking tree with many dark dead limbs. Most of our Blackjacks live no more than about 20 years and essentially all of them are hollow. I removed all of them close to our driveway. Before I did that, one would fall across our driveway with just about any heavy storm.

Things to look for on your trees are bulges, bends, splits, or cracks in trunks. Areas of dead limbs, spots where bark is missing, and holes are also signs of trouble. It may seem cute to see a squirrel popping in and out of a hole up in a tree. However, that

hole is an opening to a hollow in the wood of the tree. The squirrel did not dig that hollow out with its teeth. It is making its home in a void in the wood caused by a tree disease. When trees break, often they break right at a squirrel hole.

Not all damaged trees need to be removed. If there is no danger that a dead or dying tree will damage anything, it can be left standing if you like. Standing dead trees are called snags. Birds and other forest critters use these snags as homes or places to hunt for insects.

The Missouri Department of Conservation recommends for our Ozark hardwood forest to leave one snag larger than twenty inches diameter, four snags between ten and twenty inches diameter, and two snags between six and ten inches in diameter per acre of woods. These dimensions refer to the diameter of the tree at chest height. The technical term for that is DBH or Diameter at Breast Height.

In addition to snags, they recommend leaving the same number and sizes of den trees per acre. Den trees are those with voids, bark gaps, and rotten spots that provide homes for birds and small animals. It is OK to leave them standing out in the woods where falling limbs or broken tops won't damage things.

So, there you have it. You can feel good about being lazy and not clearing all the dead and damaged trees on your property. Get rid of the sick and damaged trees near your buildings and driveway. You can claim that leaving the rest up is your contribution to wildlife conservation.

## **Clearing brush**

When it comes to forests, Mother Nature is messy. Trees compete for sunlight. Some win and some die. Even on healthy trees, lower limbs that no longer receive sunlight die and eventually fall off. The nuts and seeds from the trees germinate and often produce a brushy clutter under the taller trees.

It is not necessary to remove the underbrush or dead material from your woods to maintain the health of your trees. The brush and dead material helps protect the soil from erosion and the young trees will replace old trees that die or are removed for safety.

However, clearing brush and dead litter near houses, roads, and trails is not particularly hazardous to trees. Without leaf litter, the soil under trees tends to dry more quickly allowing greater drought stress but light watering can make up for that problem. The main danger is not the clearing but the how the ground is used once it

is cleared. Any machinery traffic, other than lawn mowing, damages tree roots. Roots extend well past a tree's drip line and are just under the surface of the ground. Trees breathe oxygen and absorb water through their roots. Packing the ground around roots blocks oxygen and kills the roots.

## **Improving that natural look**

Natural wild foliage can be very beautiful. Sometimes, though, it looks a little shabby, not quite as fresh and healthy looking as we would like. Fortunately, it is fairly easy to freshen up wild foliage.

The biggest improvement to be made is removing dead branches in trees and shrubs. Carefully prune all dead material from each tree and bush in view. Remove not only the outer branch material but also the smaller inner dead branch material. The result will be trees and bushes that look healthier.

The next improvement is to selectively prune both trees and shrubs. Examine individual plants to locate areas of dense foliage that are the result of two branches occupying the same space. Remove one of the redundant limbs. This will produce a more open and airy appearance. Occasionally trees will be too closely spaced and you will need to thin out the weaker ones.

In those areas where you wish to walk, remove low branches and trim any foliage that hangs lower than about seven feet. Do not get carried away with overhead clearing. All that is needed is to create clearance about the same height as the doorframes in your house. This low cutting height keeps foliage in your field of view as you walk along, emphasizing its live growing character.

Avoid uniform trimming and clearing. Nature is not well organized. Your natural landscaping efforts should not hide that. Your eyes will pick out an artificially produced pattern very readily, causing you to focus on that feature instead of whatever natural beauty surrounds it. Make your cleared borders ragged, not straight. When removing brush under trees, leave one or two shrubs of random sizes.

A key philosophy in enhancing natural landscapes is borrowed from oriental gardening. You are sculpting the open space in and between plants. You are not shaping plants. You are shaping spaces. The easiest way to learn about this is to go slow with your pruning and plant removal. Make only one or two small changes at a time. Carefully study the results before making another change. Remember, you are retired; you do not have to get your landscaping work done all at once.

## Lawns

Rural lawns can be just about anything that stands low enough to walk through. In parts of the country where rain is common in the summer, lawns may simply be mowed native grasses and weeds. You might wonder why rural folks would even bother with mowing.

Lawns serve multiple purposes in rural settings. First, keeping the grass mowed discourages chiggers, ticks, and mice. Insects do not like the sun exposure and the low grass does not provide them with high enough perches to grab passing animal hosts. Mice and other small vermin do not like to travel over the open exposed mowed grass.

Another purpose for a lawn is to provide a firebreak. A green lawn is essentially fireproof. Even dried dead grass is not a serious fire hazard if it is mowed short. Wildland fires occur in all parts of the world. Even jungles are subject to damaging fires during the infrequent droughts they experience. It is foolish to ignore fire hazards in rural settings. A fifty foot wide mowed strip around your house will provide adequate protection except for the most extreme cases, such as when houses are located on ridge tops.

Of course, lawns can also provide space for outdoor recreational activities such as barbeques and parties. If you retire to an area with summer rain, maintaining a lawn consists of little more than hopping on your riding mower and driving around for a few minutes each week.

It is also possible to plant non-native grass instead of relying on natural grass seeding. Often there are commercially available strains of grass that adapt well to whatever local climate your property experiences. Mixing cool season grasses with native warm season grass can produce a hardy lawn that retains its green color better than native grasses alone. In our part of the Midwest, cool season fescue grasses are preferred for overseeding.

Overseeding is adding grass seed to an existing lawn. Following a mowing, new seed is spread over the fresh cut grass. Bare spots should be roughened prior to the seeding. Once the new grass seeds settle down through the older grass to soil level, they can germinate and grow. The existing grass protects the new young grass plants from the drying effects of the sun.

## **Adding nursery plants**

Add commercial nursery plants to your property with caution. This is not necessarily because commercial plants are dangerous to you or the natural plants and critters on your property. It is because it is often difficult for non-native plants to survive in rural situations.

Unless you take extra care to fence or otherwise protect anything you plant, you can expect it to be examined and perhaps sampled by local animals and insects. A favorite activity for raccoons is to dig up freshly planted flowers to see if there is anything good to eat buried under them. One night's visit by an armadillo can make a flowerbed look like someone drove through it with a rototiller.

Determine your area's plant hardiness zone. That is an indication of winter cold and summer heat survival requirements for plants. Buy only plants rated for your hardiness zone if you will be growing them outside.

Soil types vary greatly from place to place. Years of previous gardening experience may not help very much for achieving success at gardening around your rural home if there is a big difference in soil characteristics. Acid versus alkaline, clay versus sand versus caliche, and moist versus dry, each has its own problems. Experiment at growing plants in your new soil conditions before spending large amounts of money on commercial plants.

Our soil here on our Ozark property is primarily heavy clay. It is wonderful for holding water in our pond. It is terrible for growing stuff. Digging a hole for a plant produces a waterproof bowl that drowns and rots its roots. We killed a number of nursery plants that way. We eventually learned from the Missouri Department of Conservation to plant shrubs and trees above ground level. What works for us is to take the plant out of its nursery pot, keeping its potting soil intact, and piling commercial topsoil around it. Rainwater is then able to flow away on the top of the clay soil underneath without drowning the plant's roots. Trees and larger shrubs eventually extend their roots down into the clay below them and continue growing.

A very successful scheme for growing gardens in our part of the country is to use raised beds. They typically consist of stacked stone walls several inches high or timbers to contain topsoil. These raised beds are popular here for more than improved drainage. They are easier to work in since they require less bending over to get to whatever is planted in them.

## **Landscaping tools**

A quality set of yard work tools is a good investment for rural locations. Rural work projects tend to be large. Reliable heavy-duty tools allow you to complete those projects quicker and easier.

Don't waste your money buying cheap tools. Low prices indicate lower quality materials and workmanship. If given reasonable care, a quality set of yard tools will outlast you.

Even simple tools such as picks and shovels should be selected with care. Actually these two items are used so much they should be at the top of your 'research carefully' list. A thick bladed shovel with a heavy fiberglass handle can survive just about anything you try to do with it. A pick with a foam plastic vibration-damping core allows you to dig without painful kickback and vibration when you hit a rock.

Below is a list of the minimum set of tools that you should have on hand for your outdoors work projects:

1. Heavy-duty shovel.
2. Heavy-duty digging pick with vibration damping handle.
3. Heavy-duty wheelbarrow.
4. Heavy-duty yard rake.
5. Heavy-duty leaf rake.
6. Four or Five foot long steel digging bar.
7. Sledgehammer with vibration damping handle.
8. Long handle tree limb lopper.
9. Heavy-duty mower.
10. Backpack leaf blower.
11. Commercial grade string trimmer.

The above list is obviously not comprehensive. There many other tools available for specialized tasks. Those should be added as the need arises. Lighter and perhaps smaller versions of the above tools may be useful for work in established vegetable and flower gardens.

If you will be felling trees or cutting firewood, a good chainsaw will be handy. Read the chapter on firewood for information on woodcutting tools.

## **Lessons learned about rural landscaping**

- 1. Always buy the best tools and machines for your landscaping maintenance activities. Cheap tools usually require you put out more effort to accomplish the same work. I wish I didn't have to keep relearning that.*
- 2. Poison Ivy does NOT look exactly like Poison Oak. The plant in Missouri that looks like Poison Oak is harmless. Poison Ivy is definitely not harmless.*
- 3. Burning brush piles makes an area look better. Unfortunately, burning them destroys the evidence that you actually did some work.*