

# Shelton-Mason County Journal - Dedicated to the citizens of Mason County, Washington since 1886

## In praise of fire

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By Alex Féthière



Fun but gross: burn piles can produce something approximating biochar, but you have to cuddle them and not just lash them with diesel. (*Alex Féthière*)

I thought "On fire" would be a better title for this week, but it's vague and misleading.

Misleading assumes I'm trying to go somewhere. I've been meandering through the gardens doing maintenance as I tend the season's fires.

Last year the burn ban caught some of us by surprise. I was stuck with several piles of 20-year tree stumps, perfect labyrinths of dirt and roots in which rodents hide. Though I chip thinned trees for mulch every spring, last year's stump backlog (pun intended) kept me from this routine maintenance.

These stumps are piled or fill burn pits. Their roots still clutch clumps of clay, and the merits of this recently became clear.

I don't want to burn as an eliminative process. I try to produce as much charcoal as possible, without inhaling too much smoke in the process.

Watching traditional methods used by colliers worldwide, I have yet to see one who doesn't involve insane amounts of smoke inhalation. The life expectancy of this occupation must be terrible, whether it's the original task of making charcoal from organic matter or the later sense of mining coal.

Being a collier originally entailed interring a burning pile and letting it smolder down to charcoal under dirt. Burying a mountain of flaming wood is an excavator job, and I'd only do it with a closed cab.

Now that Sherlock in Belfair only rents open cab models, I can't make charcoal on that scale. I continue to operate with long poles, masks and great awareness of wind changes.

I've written about the benefits of biochar before, and am particularly enthusiastic about it now that I produce volumes of compost. Biochar charged with compost is the best regenerative soil amendment I can think of.

It's a shame that recent years' infernos have put us off fire. It's especially ironic that a lack of fire has been a major contributor to the fury of those blazes.

Maintenance burns that clean the forest and recycle organic matter have a cleansing action, though of course they dirty the air. By strategically suffocating areas of embers, one can get char from a maintenance burn.

In terms of air quality, it would be better to use a biochar reactor. That these are not incredibly commonplace is one of humanity's technological tragedies: a problem we could all work on solving, but the will for funding and distribution don't seem to be there.

I don't keep up with the biochar tinkers of the northern Olympic Peninsula, though I'm subscribed to their Yahoo! group. Occasionally I hear about some local engineering genius who's built a reactor that might even produce syngas, the volatile gas that can be used as a fuel.

The failure to use syngas on any kind of scale in an era when petrol is at \$5 a gallon and Europeans are panicking over energy crunches as they try to divest from Russia is puzzling. I'm getting out of my depth to even bring that up, especially considering that I'm aware of power plants in this country that consume forests, railroad ties and tires (yes, disgusting).

I just want biochar anyway. I stick to my lane, though cars running on anything other than gas are pretty exciting. Fun fact: I almost converted an ARO M461 to biodiesel after meeting a guy who produced it at a scrapyards in New York.

One can devote a lifetime to energy adventures, so I just burn piles of stuff and bury them in the process. Stacking stumps strategically causes the clay packed in their roots to bake loose and collapse into the coals, meaning I don't have to poke around in yucky fires so much.

A friend who was a wildfire firefighter will be helping me with some projects this summer, including designing firebreaks. I hope we can find an intersection between his experience and my need for biochar that will protect my land from wildfires while mining permaculture's black gold.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at [onlandist@gmail.com](mailto:onlandist@gmail.com).*

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