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Truly renewable woodstuffs

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Bluebells and ferns around a Sweet Chestnut coppice stool at Flexham Park, Bedham near Petworth, West Sussex, England. (Courtesy photo)

Coppicing is a tradition of timber cultivation that has been used in the United Kingdom for at least 6 millennia. It was the predominant method of woodland management until the mid-1800s. The term derives from the French “couper,” to cut, and has been adopted elsewhere in Europe since prehistory.

The technique cuts the trunks of a tree as close to the ground as possible. Certain species of deciduous tree will resprout vigorously from the stump, or stool, and this underwood has been put to a wealth of uses from firewood to fencing, lattice to shipwork. This is best done in winter when the trees are dormant.

For us in the Olympic Peninsula, coppicing makes the most sense for firewood production. My inadvertent introduction to coppicing was cutting down some 32-inch diameter bigleaf maples. As anyone who’s done so knows, these shot up new stems that grew over 8 feet in a season.

The resulting underwood was strong and straight enough to use for staking in a year, and continued to produce the leaves that enrich the soil as they decay. I learned that if I pruned the weaker shoots and let the more robust stems develop 15-20 years, they would produce firewood much easier to harvest than that of 100-foot tall trees — and of a diameter ready for the woodstove.

This manageability is key to coppicing’s long preindustrial life: simple hand tools are all it takes. (A chainsaw feels like an epic cheat!) Yet in antiquity, 23,000 acres of coppiced forest in southeast England could provide renewable charcoal for the regional Roman military ironworks.

This cycle can be repeated indefinitely. Coppiced trees, cycled at a juvenile stage of development, are less likely to develop disease or rot than trees allowed to mature. They also foster an increase in species diversity than one finds under a fully developed tree canopy. Some coppice stools have lived in the U.K. for over a thousand years.

A number of trees that grow around Puget Sound lend themselves to coppicing. Hazel, willow, maple and oak abound naturally.

The best results come from cutting a tree that is not yet mature. Rebecca Oaks’ and Howard Mills’ book “Coppicing & Coppice Crafts” advises that, “generally, once a tree has become mature (for the

species), the weaker the regrowth is likely to be after felling.” So I’ll only be leaving a couple of my centenarian maple stumps for coppice experiments, and instead coppicing the regrowth that they seeded a few decades ago for firewood.

Hazels have been growing in the increasing shade of these maples. Normally hazels only live 40 to 50 years, but coppicing or pruning can extend their lifespans. I have several wild hazels to play with, and only plan to coppice those that are not in deep shade. Such hazels are more likely to die.

Hazel yields up to 100 artisanal products: rake handles, baskets, beanpoles and stick chairs to name a few. In six years, my coppiced hazels will be ready to harvest and will produce hazelnuts as well in the meantime — which are of no consequence if I can’t find a way to keep them from rodents.

Squirrels misplaced three wild hazelnuts that I found while working at the base of my shrubs. Don’t believe what filbert breeders tell you — they were delicious.

Tradition recommends that coppice cuts be made as close to the ground as possible, sloping so that water and sap run off (discouraging fungal infection), and facing south so the sun dries and protects the wounds. A U.K. Forestry Commission study in 2003 holds that none of this affects yields or mortality, but try to argue with thousands of years’ folk practice.

Chestnuts, probably introduced to the U.K. by the ancient Romans and used since then, are an excellent durable coppice tree. I have planted some and they have been spreading naturally from homestead sites and arboretums in Western Washington.

Hot humid summers are needed to spread the blight that decimates chestnuts, so we in the South Sound are well-situated to revive the tradition of making fence posts, hop poles, furniture, veneer and more from this wood that is rot-resistant even when young. A mature chestnut stump will produce 6- to 10-inch-long shoots in a summer.

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