

Working in Your Woodlot – Suggestions for Getting Involved and Improving Your Property

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Introduction

There are many activities you can do easily and on your own to help improve your woodlot. First though, what is an improvement? Only you can define improvement. Some woodlot owners receive full satisfaction from letting their woodlots mature and develop through natural processes, and most woodlot owners have a special place or two in their woodlot that they never want to see change. These areas do not need to be "improved". Other woodlot owners are interested in increasing wildlife habitat or recreational opportunities. There is no obligation to manipulate your woodlands, but for woodlot owners wishing to make some changes there are several options.

My intent here is to present an overview of a variety of activities, and suggest references and reading material at the end of this article that can give a more thorough coverage. Most of these references will be available if you contact your local office of Cornell Cooperative Extension or contact your local DEC forester. Also, federal cost-share funds are sometimes available through the Stewardship Incentives Program (known as SIP) for these and other activities, so check with your local DEC forester before beginning to work in the woods.

Getting Started – Knowing What You Want

The pivotal and perhaps most important step in making your woodlot work for you is to clearly and explicitly state your objectives. Explicitly stating and then writing down your ownership objectives is the step that distinguishes deliberate management from those activities that are happenstance and that will often reduce your future options. Your objectives guide your actions. Clearly stated objectives provide direction, simplify the decision making process, and provide a standard to gauge success. Your management objectives reflect what you value about your forests. These are your tangible and intangible personal values and the values provided to your community as a result of your management activities.

The first step in making your forest management objectives is thinking about your forest: why do you own your forest, what do you like about your forest, and how do you want your forest to look next year, in ten years, and in the next generation of ownership. Many people own forests because they inherited them; purchased them as a place for privacy, wildlife viewing, or recreation; or purchased them for investment purposes. This is a start for your objectives as it explains perhaps a sentimental value, the value of retreat or seclusion, the value of an investment, or most likely some combination of the three. You may like to visit the part of your forest where you had a pleasant experience, a scenic overlook, the spot where you can always flush a grouse or run a rabbit, or the grove of red oak or sugar maple that will someday help support you in retirement. Finally, the vision of your future forest is probably closely aligned with what you like about your forest. For example, keeping the memorable spot unchanged, ready access to grouse cover, or an increase in the sawtimber value of your oak or maple stand. Again, your values help define your forest management objectives. These thoughts and visions are the basis of your forest management objectives because they provide the direction and the standards for successful management.

The next step is to talk with a professional DEC forester or private consulting forester for help in organizing these objectives into a management plan. Once you have a good idea of what you want, your objectives, you can begin tackling a variety of activities. Below are several that can be accomplished by most woodlot owners, and that you can pursue with different levels of equipment and energy.

Walking Into Your Woodlot

One activity that is a great for woodlot owners who are beginning to explore their property and think about forest management is to develop a trail system that gives you easy access. This is an important activity because trails allow for easier travel and thus allow the owners to see their property and think about what they might like to do next. I've heard many private forest landowners comment that establishing a trail system was an important process to begin to manage their woodland.

The trail system can be as simple or elaborate as suits your needs. You can start from scratch or you can expand on an existing network already on your property. The history of your woodlot, your energy, your objectives, and your time will all influence the trails you establish. If your woodlot is fairly young, grew from an abandoned agricultural field, or has never been harvested, then you will likely need to start from scratch. Even if you previously had some logging done, and can use the existing trails, you may need to connect some trails to suit your needs. In any case, spend some time walking around to get a feel for the land and forest. Avoid wet areas, steep terrain, or other features that would make walking or cross country skiing difficult. Check with your extension agent, DEC forester, or SWCD office for topography maps and aerial photographs that let you see the big picture. Depending on your preference, you might want to emphasize straight sections versus sections with curves. Once you have decided where the trail should be placed, you can flag the trail with plastic ribbon purchased at the hardware store or through a forestry supply company (it's called surveyor's flagging or tape).

Once flagged, how trail width depends on your equipment and resources. You might decide to simply trim a few branches along the path. If you have a chainsaw and have taken part in a safety course then you might try a more aggressive clearing of the trail. If you are using portions of old logging trails, maybe you or your neighbor has a tractor and brush hog that can clear some of the brush or bramble more quickly. In any event, be careful and enjoy your improved access and new perspective.

In some situations you may be planning to harvest timber or firewood using a professional forester and commercial logger. In this case, make sure you discuss with the forester and logger your interests in trails for hiking, skiing, bird watching or whatever, and ask to have this taken into account when the skid trails are being established. If the logger is being asked to do extra work then bid prices will likely be lower, but you can have a nice trail system established with little effort on your part. Make sure your forester also provides oversight on re-seeding the skid trails to stabilize soils and prevent erosion.

Improvement Cutting

Before discussing some of the aspects of improvement cutting, it's important to revisit my earlier comments about the need for each landowner to personally define what constitutes an "improvement". Each landowner is different. For some, an improvement results in more deer, more songbirds, better recreational trails, or higher quality timber. However you define it, know that it may be different than someone who knocks at your door offering to cut a few trees to "improve" your woodlot.

As implied above, you must know what you want to improve before you can begin improving. Improvement cuts fall into a category of forest management known as intermediate cutting, or cutting that occurs during the middle stages of a forest's development. Improvement cuts are done for several possible reasons: (1) to change the mixture of species present by removing undesirable species you wish fewer of; (2) to change how your forest looks, for example you might wish to remove saplings in an area to improve visibility; (3) to improve forest health by removing diseased or dying trees; or (4) to improve growth by reducing competition by thinning the woodlot. You can obviously mix and match your approach, but do so only after reviewing your management objectives.

Selecting trees to remove can be difficult. The specific trees to remove depends on your objectives, but might include diseased trees, trees of poor form, trees with weak wood, or trees that block a view. It's always a good idea to speak with a DEC forester or a professional forester from the DEC list of *Cooperating Consulting Foresters* for assistance. Explain your objectives and have them help you select some trees for removal. If you have a large woodlot and the trees are of moderate size (maybe 8 to 12 inches in diameter) then you might be able to sell some for firewood. Otherwise, you'll need to either hire some to complete the work or complete the work yourself with a chainsaw or by girdling the trees. If you sell firewood (or trade trees in your woodlot in return for firewood) make certain you contact a professional forester as there are potential and serious legal and financial pitfalls to be aware of and to avoid.

The cutting part of the improvement might be with a chain saw, or it might be by girdling the tree. Using a chain saw requires special skills and training, but can provide the benefit of firewood. Girdling doesn't require as much equipment and simply means that you take a hatchet or axe and frill around a tree enough to shave the bark in a complete circle. You can also girdle a tree with a chain saw. Girdling breaks the connection the tree crown has with the roots, and eventually kills the tree. Effective girdles don't need to be very deep. You can hasten the process by applying an appropriate herbicide into the frill. Whether chain saw or axe, you are using a tool that deserves respect so be careful.

Crop Tree Management

Crop tree management is a forestry strategy that focuses on "crop" trees, or trees to leave until the final harvest. Anyone who has thinned a carrot patch to encourage growth can understand crop tree management. The concept is actually fairly simple whether applied in a garden or woodlot, but the process requires some time and effort to achieve the optimal result. This is a good strategy for landowners interested in playing an active role in the management of their property, but requires some extra

work.

Crop tree management (CTM) is a useful management strategy especially for the private forest landowner who has more than a passing interest in their woodlands, is comfortable identifying trees, has clearly stated objectives, has spent some time talking with a professional forester, and who wants to become more integral to managing his or her land. CTM is a nice because you can try it on a couple acres and see if you like it before you start working on more acreage. CTM differs from improvement cutting by focusing more on the trees you leave than on the trees to remove. Both are suitable in certain situations.

Just as you define improvement, you also define the criteria for your crop trees. In one part of your woodlot, perhaps where you like to watch squirrels and turkeys, you might select crop tree criteria to be tree species that produce fruits these wildlife eat (called mast). So, you might favor species such as black cherry, oaks, walnut, and hickory. In another part of your woodlot where the ground is more fertile you might set criteria for timber production and favor black cheery, oak, sugar maple, and white ash. In addition to wildlife and timber, other criteria might include aesthetics (fall color, unique shape, unusual species, etc.) or water quality.

Carrying out crop tree management is straight forward, but again requires some time and effort to learn some new skills. First, you should walk through a small section of your woodlot several times getting a feel for the trees you have to work with. Then, select trees that meet your criteria. You might use more of the plastic flagging tape used for trails. Flag the crop tree, and then flag the nearby trees with crowns that touch your crop tree. Your goal is to free the crop tree crown on all four sides so it is free to grow. Use a different color flagging for the trees to be removed. Do this over an acre (one acre is a square with sides that are 209 feet long) with a goal to select between 50 to 75 crop trees in woodlots with semi-mature trees (10 to 14 inches), and more trees in younger forests. If the amount of flagging looks like more cutting or girdling than you are comfortable with then reduce the number of crop trees rather than freeing some crowns on less than all four sides.

The end result of crop tree management will be crop trees that have the best chance to grow because of reduced competition. These trees will have the best chance for good health, seed production, and foliage development. Also, if you cut the neighboring trees rather than girdle them then you will have some firewood in the process as well.

Learn More By Seeing More

Finally, let me suggest that some of you may find improvements to your woodlot by participating in a Cornell Cooperative Extension volunteer program know as "Master Forest Owner/COVERTS volunteers. This is not for everyone, but if you would like some additional training in basic woodlot management skills and especially if you would like to volunteer your time to neighbors and friends interested in forest management, then this peer-counseling program might work for you.

The Master Forest Owner (MFO) volunteer program is designed to provide private landowners with a "peer" they can talk to about forestry. MFO volunteers are not trained professionals and they cannot offer technical advice, but they own forest land, have experienced many of the situations their neighbors are working through, and are good listeners who know what resources are available for assistance.

Often a landowner will call the local office of Cornell Cooperative Extension or DEC with a request for assistance with forestry, but they are not ready to meet with a professional DEC forester or private consulting forester. The extension agent or DEC may suggest a free visit from a local MFO to walk through the woodlot. The MFO will see the property, hear the landowner's interests and objectives, and witness some of the things the landowner has been doing. Ultimately the MFO may encourage the landowner to seek a free visit from a DEC forester or perhaps some literature before the forester visits. In the end, the landowner has made a new friend and gotten some good direction and the MFO has also made a friend and learned more about his or her woodlot by walking through other woodlots.

So consider the MFO program. You might be interested in a free visit from a MFO volunteer, someone who has been in your shoes and worried the same worries. You might also be interested in becoming one of those volunteers, especially if you have been active on your property and have a keen interest in helping your community and fellow woodlot owners.

Action Steps – What to Do Next

1. Explicitly state your management objectives. If you have trouble thinking through all this, you might seek a visit from a MFO volunteer. Others may be ready for a free visit from a DEC forester who can help them with their objectives and perhaps a written management plan.

2. Get maps and aerial photographs of your woodlot. Seek assistance with your extension agent, DEC forester, or SWCD office. This will help you see what your land has to offer and help with planning.
3. Spend time in the woods walking around. Note that some sections of your woodlot may be good for some activities and in other areas you might focus on different things. Some objective are compatible and others are mutually exclusive.
4. Get involved in landowner associations. In Central New York and throughout the state the New York Forest Owners Association (NYFOA) is a group of private forest landowners who share a common interest in managing their woodlands. They have a bimonthly publication, several chapters and related activities, and two annual meetings. They can be reached at (800) 836-3566. Elsewhere in the state similar groups are available also, such as the Catskill Forest Association (914) 586 – 3054 or the Tug Hill Resource Investment for Tomorrow (THRIFT) available at (315) 376 - 5595
5. Finally, before you take any significant action, seek professional assistance from a DEC forester. DEC foresters will make a free visit to your property, they provide unbiased technical assistance, and can help you find answers to questions that will help you maximize the enjoyment you receive from your property.

Suggested References

[Note: NYS residents need to add sales tax to most instate purchases. Please call the distributors for more information]

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