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Making a Home in the Woods

by Elliott Menashe

Like many Pacific Northwesterners, you may have purchased wooded land with the intention of eventually building a home. But before you call the loggers, take some time to think through your plan. Decisions you make now will affect the value of your property and the lifestyle you enjoy there for as long as you own the land.

As a forester who often consults with property owners, too often I am called in after a property has been cleared and the owners have begun to regret decisions they made. Trees that once created privacy and shade are gone. Clearing on or above slopes may be contributing to soil erosion and mudslides. Desired trees may have been, or may be vulnerable to blow-down. The property's wildlife and natural beauty—a big part of why the property was purchased in the first place—may never recover.

Fortunately, some simple management practices can reduce environmental impacts of clearing, increase the value of your property, and help you to avoid long-term problems that can be difficult to remedy and costly to correct.

TO LOG OR NOT TO LOG

Wooded properties are often logged before or during homesite development to help defray costs. But short-term economic gain may not be the best value for you in the long run. Before you bring in a logger, get the answers to the following questions:

- What are the full costs of logging and how much money would you actually end up with? Have a professional forester, not a logger, estimate the volume of timber present on the property and the full cost of harvest. (Cooperative Extension has a list of forestry consultants.)
- Could clearing cause expensive problems such as soil compaction and erosion, or damage resulting from blow-down of remaining trees?
- If the cleared area is not replanted soon after clearing, it will be invaded by weedy plants such as Himalayan blackberry. Have you considered the cost of landscaping the area? How much would it cost to clear the area a second time?
- Once the cleared area is landscaped, it will have to be maintained. Do you have the time and/or money to do this? Never clear more than you're willing to maintain.
- Could you receive ongoing income by harvesting other forest products from your property, such as boughs and floral greens? There is an ever-increasing market for such products. If you are not interested in collecting them yourself, you may be able to lease collection rights to someone else.

Cooperative Extension has a publication that tells you about these products.

- How will clearing your land affect your property taxes? Have you considered potential savings if your property qualifies for an open space or agricultural tax exemption?
- What value do the trees add to your property? Potential property buyers today are often looking for a low-maintenance landscape where they will be able to enjoy wildlife. Check with a real estate agent on the difference in market value of your land with and without trees.

IF YOU DO DECIDE TO LOG

If you do decide to log, invest the time to make a careful plan. (You'll need one to get a permit anyway.) It needn't be elaborate or expensive.

On your plan note the general topography of your property and natural features such as streams and wetlands, steep slopes, wildlife areas, vegetation, and anything you find interesting.

On a clear acetate or tracing paper overlay you can then sketch ideas for where buildings, roads, paths, well, septic system, utilities, and other development features might be placed.

The less you alter the existing landscape, the less chance you'll have to create problems, and the less you will spend to develop your property. Work with your site's existing features as much as possible. Plan to make use of existing vegetation in future landscaping. Well-established native trees, shrubs, and groundcovers are beautiful, attractive to wildlife, easy to maintain-and free if you keep what you already have.

Here are some things to consider in making your plan:

- Leave adequate undisturbed buffers of native vegetation anywhere that you want to shield your house from view, or screen out a view you don't want to see.
- Leave adequate undisturbed buffers anywhere that noise could be a problem, such as between your house and a road.
- Deciduous trees on the south side of your house will cool you in the summer. Evergreens on the side of your house that faces prevailing winter winds can make a big difference in how much you pay for heat.
- Identify areas that will be difficult to maintain or present a possible hazard, such as steep slopes, and avoid disturbing them.
- Leave buffers of native vegetation around streams, wetlands, and other areas that are ecologically fragile and/or contain significant wildlife habitat.
- It's always a good idea to leave substantial buffers of undisturbed trees and other vegetation between you and neighboring properties. Never assume that neighboring properties will remain as they are now.
- If you decide to keep a tree, don't keep just the one. Clumps of trees with under-story shrubs and groundcovers look more natural, provide more wildlife habitat, and may be less susceptible to blow-down.

Once you've decided what areas you do want to clear, be sure to obtain the proper permits. Don't let loggers remove deformed or young healthy trees, as they will have little value at the mill. Also retain snags (standing dead trees), where they are not a safety hazard, and old growth stumps, because these are important for wildlife. Do remove high hazard trees,

such as red alder, near homesites and other structures.

When logging begins, don't strip the under-story plants and groundcover unnecessarily. Limit machine entry as much as possible. To protect desired trees from machine damage, temporarily leave a buffer of "sacrifice" trees around those you want to keep. These trees can be cut and removed just before equipment leaves the site.

Throughout this process, be ready to revise your ideas and alter your plans as necessary. Your perspective may change as you learn more about your land.

In my experience, most people end up clearing far too much land. Many of them end up having regrets. A good rule of thumb is to take your time, make a plan, and know your land before you develop it. Remember, land is (relatively) easy to clear, but can take generations to re-grow.