

Gardening the Forest

Aftercare for growing trees

IT WILL REDUCE TREE MORTALITY

by Dyke Van Etten Williams



THE IDEA OF “GARDENING THE FOREST” seems strange to me, but I’ve found that just a little bit of extra care makes a huge difference in both the survival and growth rates of trees I’ve planted or moved, regardless of species or method. Here are several things you can do to help your offspring reach that vital “maturity” stage where they are producing cones and seeds and thus replacing themselves:

“Release” them often. In the spring before leaves come out you can see every one of the conifers you have planted—great time to walk about with clippers and prune away any other plants that might impinge on your progeny. Another good time is in mid-summer after the “scrub” brush—hazel, alder, willow etc. have grown in for the year. After leaves go in the fall is a third opportunity, since again you can see exactly what is overshadowing what. Use clippers to prune back other competing brush, weeds and treelets—either docking branches or removing whole trunks.

Clip branches immediately overhead as well to let sunlight and air in. You want to make all the sunlight, water and soil nutrients available to the new kids on the block. Ideally, keep your new trees and growing trees in a freed circle at least 2’–3’ in diameter—some experts say more like 9’–10’. Plan to have your clippers in your back pocket every time you go out the door!

“Thin” your newer trees as they grow wider and higher, so that they will end up with about 30’ between mature tree trunks. Trees crowded together compete with each other, resulting in poor growth, spindly shapes, weaker structure etc. Shut your eyes and imagine hard for a moment what each tree might be like in 10 years before selecting what to prune or cull. Keep diversity of species everywhere.

“Natural” or “View”? Most species can be successfully “limbed up” if that is what you want. Should one leave each tree as it chooses to grow, or prune it to



provide a better view, more understory air or even that stately “estate” or “park” look? Personally I think most balsam and spruce look a bit silly with the bottom branches removed unless they are very large trees, where taking off the usually-dead lower branches sometimes helps their appearance. Birch in clumps often look better with a bit of pruning. Red and jack pines likewise. Keep branches from Tree A from hitting or intermingling with branches from Tree B. They should all have their own personal space! White pines are a special case because of blister rust. Cedars will be pruned by the deer whatever you plan. Remember that the trees furthest from your eyeball will screen you from others the most—those closest to you will screen the least and make it hardest for you to see “out”. “Firewise” wisdom recommends that you have no conifers within 30’–50’ of a building—deciduous trees don’t count.

Limbing up is simply a matter of removing lower branches. Make a clean, vertical saw or clippers cut right where the conical “bud collar” tapers into the branch. Slightly undercut below larger branches first so that the bark doesn’t tear on down the trunk when sawing from the top. The general rule of thumb is to leave at least two-thirds of the foliage intact. Another gimmick is to look at a tree, limb up to where you want it (usually at a major branching point) and then clip the smaller branches and foliage away from that next level up so only the wood of the branches shows. Clip along each branch 2’–4’ so it *appears* as though more limbing has been done but it really hasn’t.

Vines & Climbers. Our area has

everything from low, 2’ ground creepers that can smother seedlings to wild grape and other vines that can climb, enwrap and kill a 50’ tree. At the very least, cut the main vine stem as low to the ground as possible to at least kill the vine. If you can, pull the vine’s remnants out of the seedling or tree without unduly damaging the host. If the remnants won’t come when you pull, try leaving it for a year or two to dry out and pull again. If need be, leave whatever pieces of vine you cannot pull out of the tree once the stem is cut—a dead vine does nowhere near the damage a live one does. Most vines simply grow new tendrils from the part left in the ground, so check each year where you know a vine has been and cut out any new attempts it may be making on your trees.

ESPECIALLY FOR WHITE PINES

White Pine Blister Rust will cause brown needles and raised, sometimes oozy blisters on branches and eventually on the trunk. Prune diseased branches or trunk tops immediately and well inboard (12” or more) of any disease signs. Pruned branches do not need to be removed from the area nor your clippers sterilized. The wild cranberry/gooseberry family (“ribes”) of bushes serves as the “vector” for the blister rust virus, so the likelihood of white pine surviving in a dense area of many such bushes is not good. Most experts consider removing the vector in large areas to be impossible, but see *Lake of the Woods Area News*, May, 2010 pg. 61 “Ribes May Be Controllable” about controlling or removing it in smaller areas and on islands.

• **“Pruning Up”:** Remove the bottom branches of each white pine once it reaches maybe a foot or more tall. Leave at least two-thirds of the tree volume intact, but get every single bottom branch because blister rust thrives in small, damp areas and those low branches touching or near the ground or duff collect and retain rain and dew long after the higher branches have dried. Move the clipped branches away from the trunk so they don’t keep moisture right there, but you do not need to fully remove or burn your prunings. Clip each branch just outside its raised “bud collar” ring with a clean cut straight up and down. Prune up teenage and mature trees too—eventually to about 9’ up, being sure to leave at least two-thirds of the foliage intact. It’s a gradual process.

• **White Pine Weevil:** The weevil lays its eggs in the leader shoot of the white pine where the larvae hatch and grow in late spring and early summer. Their presence is obvious because the leader shoot needles turn brown. Immediately remove the leader a good foot below the last browned needles and *burn it* at once to kill the larvae. Soon a nearby side branch will begin growing upwards and become the new leader shoot. That tree will survive.

• **Deer Browse Damage:** If deer nibble off the leader shoot and bud, prune the leader with a clean cut if it is damaged. A side branch will soon grow upwards to become the new leader. If this happens again, think hard about bud caps or other deterrents (see below).

• **“Bud Caps”:** Once a tree is about 6” tall you can apply bud caps in late

September and through October to keep deer from browsing off the top leader bud. Any kind of office-type paper 2.3" x 4.3" or so works fine. You can cut an 8.5" x 14" sheet in half the long way and then each strip into 6 sections. Fold the paper around the leader, putting your index finger in the fold and over the bud from

the top. The bud should be 1/2" below the cap's top. Use any office stapler to hold the cap in place by catching several needles in the staple but leaving room for bud growth. Remove the caps each spring. Once the tree's leader is over 5' tall, caps are no longer needed.

• **Avoid planting** where other whites already show blister rust or weevil signs or any obvious stress. Rust infection is most likely in small forest openings, topographic depressions and at bases of slopes. Avoid areas with large deer populations unless you plan to use bud caps, fencing or other deer deterrents each fall.

Renewing your forest. Make sure your great forest is constantly being renewed and replaced, either by its own reseeding cycles or by your efforts. We've lived in a jackpine forest which was ninety years old for an eighty-year lifetime tree. Old timers were falling over frequently, with few new ones coming up under them as volunteers. That's what got me planting trees in the first place—trying to get new trees growing before the old trees vanished, and planting a multi-cultural



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New Event! Gardening the Forest

Wednesday, July 7, 2010 • 9:30 am – 11:30 am • Best Western Lakeside Inn

Presented by Dyke Williams; Lake of the Woods Area News contributor and Director of the Quetico Superior Foundation

Every year, many of us dutifully purchase and plant our seedlings, treat them with tender loving care and still lose a percentage to mother nature. Dyke will help us make the most of our plantings and learn the importance of the forest to the overall success of our entire regional (and global) ecosystem.

Topics he'll cover include:

- Local species and how best to plant and care for them.
- The importance of trees—why plant them in the first place?
- Climate change and its impact on our forests.
- The role of fire in forest growth.
- Exotic species/native species.
- 'Understory' bushes and their importance; weeds, food bushes, berry patches.

Dyke has been an avid forest gardener for many years and will be sure to provide us with a lot to learn along with practical advice for those of us who love our trees.

Registration is \$5 for LOWDPOA members and \$10 for non-members. For information on how to become a LOWDPOA member, please contact us at 807-468-8715, or visit our website at www.lowdpoa.com.

See page 14 for registration form and details.

forest to supplant the mono-cultural one it was replacing. Lots of work but I enjoyed it immensely—true quality time outdoors. Hope you enjoy it too!

ADDITIONAL READING:

“How to Control Deer Damage in Tree Plantings,” Demchik, UMN http://cfc.cfans.umn.edu/outreach/ftn/FTN4_3.htm#deer.

Rajala, Jack. “Bringing Back The White Pine”. The definitive book on planting and caring for these wonderful trees. An article on Jack Rajala appears in the 2008 Spring edition of the Quetico Superior Foundation’s newsletter *Wilderness News* and is reprinted on that web site (www.queticosuperior.org).

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