



Brush Piling

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EVERYBODY SEEKS ORDER IN HIS LIFE somewhere, somehow. Through work, through family, through faith, and in other ways large and small, we bring structure to our days. On the simplest and most literal level, we try to keep our house in order.

It matters, of course, how big a house we're talking about. The city dweller may have only a couple of rooms in which to impose an order that satisfies him; the villager, not much more: a house, a yard, a garden. It's the countryman, with acres at his disposal, who truly has a field on which to express his need for figure, for form. Indeed, he has a field large enough to reduce his striving for order to the vain, the derisory, the merely eccentric — and this nowhere more than in the wooded hill country of Vermont.

I had occasion to reflect along these lines last fall, in the course of getting in my winter firewood. At some point it occurred to me that, in the woods, at least, I spent less time and effort in obtaining fuel — that is, in felling, limbing and sectioning trees — than I did in picking up after myself.

I was cutting around a small meadow, woods-edge trees that I could make fall in the clear for easier handling. A mature hardwood growing in a setting like this has some significant part of its total mass in its smaller side and upper branches. These have little use at any conflagration greater than a weenie roast. They are not firewood. What are they?

Reader, they are brush.

Even an amateur, one-man cordwood operation like mine produces

brush the way a pillow fight in the boys' dorm produces feathers: abundantly, uncontrollably, inconveniently. What is to be done with it?

Well, you can burn it. But to burn, your brush must be dry, and if it's dry, then very often so are its surroundings. Little fires easily become big fires. Again, you can let it lie. After all, brush is only sticks. They decay and disappear. But this solution, too, has its risks. The brush is in your way. As you work, you must step on it, around it, through it. You must trip over it — not recommended when operating a chain saw.

Therefore, you pause in your woodcutting to pick up the accumulating brush and gather it in one place, handy but out of the way. The result is a brush pile, a humble product that would seem to have no meaning beyond the purely practical, but whose construction, at least in my hands, can take on an energy of its own that quickly rises above need, sense, even reason.

Brush piles have an architecture. They have a design, because their builder gives them a design. For my part, I like to build high. I have made brush piles that were seven or eight feet tall. They look like the dark and silent lodges of a deserted Indian village that the forest is reclaiming. In fact, the comparison is not completely fanciful: brush piles are the forest's cities of refuge. They provide shelter for a host of small creatures. The songbird can duck into a brush pile to escape the hunting hawk. The mouse can make its nest deep in the recesses of a brush pile and raise its young in relative safety. In addition, brush piles

make the uppermost parts of forest trees accessible to the deer, turkeys and other browsers who, when the trees are standing, can't reach the lofty buds and fruits they rely on for food. Altogether, if your aim is to assist a piece of woodland in supporting wildlife, you can do a lot worse than spend your time making brush piles.

I would like to say that it is such mature considerations related to safety — my own and the little birds' — that lead me to take the pains I do on my own brush piles. I stack my brush with care, positioning and repositioning branches on the pile, even using loppers to trim sticks that don't lie securely. It can be slow work. Maneuvering a 10-foot, zigzagging beech branch onto the top of a pile in thick woods is like trying to open an umbrella in a phone booth. I thrash and flail about like a mad fly-fisherman far from the stream.

And eventually I wonder: Why? Why bother? The brush doesn't care how neatly it is laid down. Even my wild beneficiaries, the warblers and wood mice, don't care. Only I care, and only, I think, because of the human instinct for good order, even quite superfluous good order, which these reflections began by proposing. Everybody seeks order in his life somewhere, somehow. Everybody loves form. Your brush is only sticks. Whatever you do or don't do with them, they decay and disappear. You might as well toss them together any old way. You might — but you don't. 🍂

You can hear the author read his essay at www.VermontLife.com.