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Connolly: Getting rid of tree stumps

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It's been a tough couple of years for trees, creating a bumper crop of stumps, snags and root sprouts. Former tree owners can take care of stumps and snags in three basic ways: Decay, repurpose or remove.

Decay is free or inexpensive, depending on your approach. With no effort at all three to seven years of decay will reduce most tree stumps to easy pickings. Since that time line stretches the patience of some, however, there are ways to put it on the fast track through nitrogen applications.

Accelerated decay is slower than stump grinding or excavation - but less expensive, too. There are commercial products that speed stump decay but most of them rely on the same basic agent as do the homegrown approaches: nitrogen.

Where packaged products usually rely on potassium nitrate, do-it-yourselfers may rely on cow manure, blood meal or other high-nitrogen agricultural byproducts. Either way, the nitrogen acts as a double mocha energy drink for the microorganisms surrounding the stump. To get the fastest action, drill or axe the stump so the nitrogen source can penetrate internal surfaces. It helps to keep the stump moist and dark. For home-grown methods such as cow or chicken manure, most sources advise keeping the stump covered with wet leaves, straw, compost, soil, or a combination of the above. In any case, in six months to a year, the stump will begin to flake and crumble.

A note of caution: If the stumps are within 20 feet of a water body of any sort, remember that nitrogen can pollute and shouldn't be used.

Stump-burning is a low-cost method of reducing the stump that falls somewhere between decay and quick removal, but it requires quite a bit more planning and vigilance. Burning methods are easy to find on the Internet. Some use fuel and burn quickly, while others more closely resemble the slow burn employed by the charcoal makers whose smoky structures once dotted Connecticut's hillsides (charpitting).

But here's an important note to would-be stump burners. Do your homework before you light a stump and handle with care. Permits may be required. This technique may not help your popularity-ranking among neighbors.

Repurposing may not be your first choice for tree stumps or snags, but there are examples that range from beautiful to utilitarian. For example, see the expert carving of a fallen Norway maple by Clinton sculptor Kris Connors at the Ivoryton Playhouse in Essex. I have also seen old tree stumps gutted for flower planters, turned into benches, become structural supports for decks, tree houses and clotheslines, and even become a spout hole for a fountain.

Decorative arts aside, tall trunks and standing dead trees have unique ecological value if allowed to stay.

"Dead trees are actually a necessity to some wildlife," says Tony Irving, a forest ecologist and principal at EECOS in Lyme.

Woodpeckers make cavities in snags both to find food and to nest.

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"But then the cavities become available to chickadees and tufted titmouse and other woodland bird species," he says. "Owls use them. Flying squirrels use them. I've even found raccoon nests in snags."

Of course, if immediate removal is your goal, you probably already know that some companies specialize in stump grinding. You can also rent the equipment. Once ground, the old stump can be used as coarse mulch or it can be mixed into a compost pile, particularly one with lots of green material or fresh manure. It can also be mixed with the surrounding soil, where it will quickly decay.

Finally, stumps can be excavated but be prepared to pay not only for the heavy equipment but possibly for disposal as well.

As for those hopeful shoots that grow around stumps, forest ecologist Tony Irving says, "Sprouts are a symptom of an oversized root system putting out energy and producing potential new trunks."

Some species are especially prone to sprouting, says Irving. He lists ash, oak, tulip poplar, apple, sugar maple, hickory, birch, and willow. You can let sprouts grow for a few years and then select one to regrow. Or, if you want them all gone, cut them back repeatedly. The stump will run out of energy.

Winter is coming and it is safe to predict that more trees will fall. But you don't need to be stumped by stumps - the options are many.

KATHY CONNOLLY IS A LANDSCAPE DESIGNER, GARDEN WRITER AND FREQUENT SPEAKER. HER WORKSHOP "DESIGN, PLANT AND MAINTAIN YOUR FOUNDATION GARDENS" WILL BE HELD OCT. 12 AT THE UCONN EXTENSION CENTER IN HADDAM, EMAIL KATHY@SPEAKING OF LANDSCAPES.COM FOR INFORMATION OR SEE HER WEBSITE WWW.SPEAKINGOFLANDSCAPES.COM.

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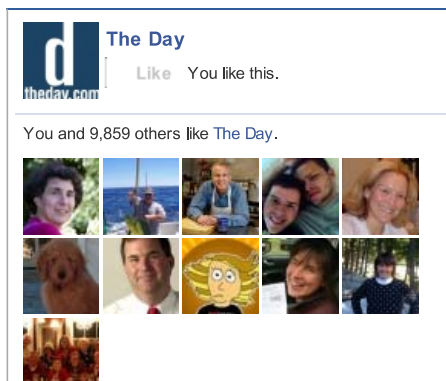
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