

COPPICING - the way forward

Coppicing trees is one of the most efficient ways to harness solar energy, and make it available to be used by human beings. It involves working with trees that are able to grow multiple stems from a single root base – such as hazel, willow, ash, and chestnut – and cutting all the stems down to the ground at regular intervals. The work is done at this time of year, when the tree is dormant, and its life-force has withdrawn into the root system. In the spring, the tree forms new buds on the cut stems, and pushes up new shoots from the roots, and draws upon its resources to re-establish an imposing above-ground presence as quickly as possible.

This is what helps to make coppiced trees much more efficient at harnessing solar energy than other forms of land use: land used for growing crops is relatively inefficient, as crop plants generally have short life cycles; pasture land does have a network of perennial roots, but grasses cannot compete with trees in leaf surface area; and, whilst large timber trees are extremely efficient in converting sunlight into wood, there is a long interval from when they are felled to when a new sapling reaches maturity.

In its own way, coppiced wood is as abundant a source of energy as are fossil fuels – but it dictates a certain way of life, and system of government.

Coppiced trees, carefully placed on banks surrounding small fields close to the house, cut on a nine-year cycle, for example, generate quantities of material that would be hard to imagine if you have never had a chance to undertake the work. Traditionally, the bulk of the material is made into faggots; poles needed for specific purposes are

selected and put to one side, and the rest of the material is cut into logs for the fire. In its own way, coppiced wood is as abundant a source of energy as are fossil fuels – but it dictates a certain way of life, and system of government.

Providing that it is done regularly, the coppicing can be done with hand tools, and over the course of a few weeks in winter, huge piles of faggots and firewood can build up round a work site. There is not, however, a simple way of transporting this material, so an economy built on using coppiced wood as its main energy source, is bound to be de-centralised, and made up of small, self-governing hamlets and villages, each of which is independent in terms of energy, and most other resources.

Europe has not really had this type of economy for a long time. It has, instead, experimented with a range of centralised, or semi-centralised systems of government, with power being concentrated in towns and cities. There is a limit to how much coppiced material can be transported to fuel a town, which partly explains why people first turned to coal and then oil and gas to meet their energy needs.

Particularly over the past hundred years, the countryside has been remodelled to focus purely upon crop production, and the majority of the old coppices have been uprooted, in an attempt to grow enough food to feed the urban population.

The catastrophic consequences of these policies – for the climate, for wildlife, for water quality, and for social equality – are now being acknowledged, to a certain extent. However, rather than considering an organised return to the countryside, the re-establishment of coppices, and an organised investment in a proven, sustainable, eco-friendly, highly-efficient, equitable, carbon positive, self-reproducing, free-of-charge energy source, the powers that be still seem determined to gamble our futures on untried technologies, the main purpose of which appears to be the maintenance of financial profits and the status quo.

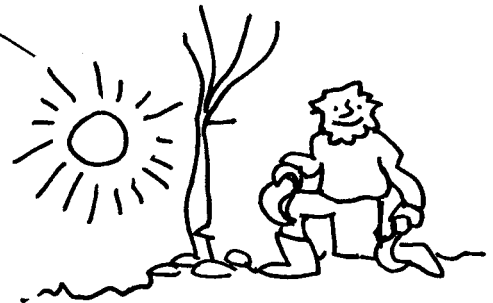
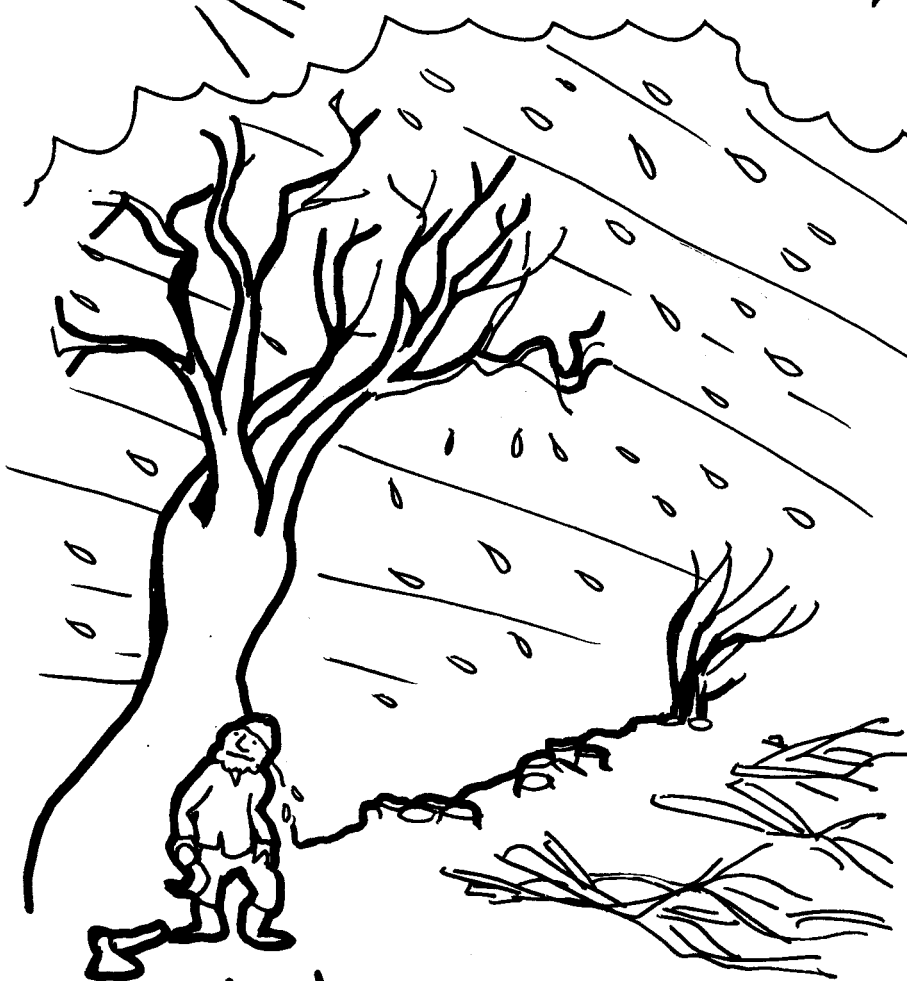
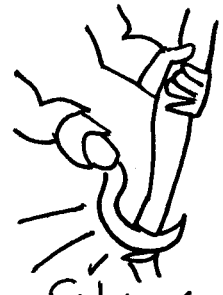
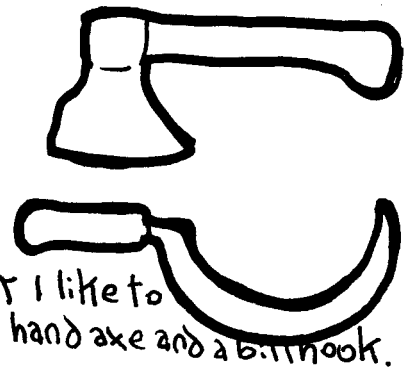
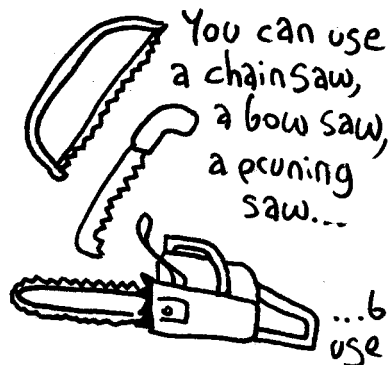
How Long Does it Take?

It takes time to establish a strong coppice. It is difficult to say how long.

We were able to extend our garden around twelve years ago by purchasing a neighbouring cereal field. We divided it up into small fields, and planted hazel saplings, which we found growing wild, on rudimentary banks that we made with a hoe. Conditions were harsh, and growth was slow at first, but after about eight years the young trees were beginning to overshadow some of the crops, and we started to cut some of the banks. The yield was low, but the trees grew back vigorously, with the straight stems that one associates with coppices. Cutting just one or two banks at a time means that the area retains its wooded atmosphere, and this seems to encourage re-growth.

Next time we cut the trees, the yield will be bigger, meaning that it takes fifteen to twenty years before the new coppices provide a meaningful amount of wood.

It is hard to estimate the age of pre-existing coppices on our land, some of which had been neglected for quite a long period of time. We found that they can be brought back into a regular coppicing cycle relatively easily: they simply need to be cut back to the ground, and all overshadowing vegetation removed, so that the stumps receive plenty of sunlight.



coppicing Hazel

Try to cut the wood as low to the ground as possible

and keep your tools sharp

Nature will forgive your mistakes

And you will soon become a master wood cutter

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