

Can You Dig It?

By Schann Nelson
OSU Master Gardener



The quantity of vegetation created in a season MUST be an identifying characteristic of the maritime temperate rain forest that dominates the landscape of the western edge of the Pacific northwest. This biological richness allows, by virtue of the wealth of relatively small areas maintained as habitat, the dense population of urban areas without being overwhelmed by concrete and stone. These open areas help revitalize neighborhoods, protect and preserve native species, and greatly enhance the quality of life in the entire region. Connecting, and allowing movement between, these urban areas across the rich agricultural land and into forests of the rural landscape creates an ecology that can be sustained — I hope.

But the sheer mass of seasonal vegetation growth is astounding. And it’s not just in one season; every year we get three good growing seasons, each creating another layer of mulch and brush. It takes a lot of work to hack out and maintain a space to exist as you get closer to the rich rural landscape. I’m interested to see what develops in some of the small fenced ‘wild spaces’ and wetlands that have been built inside the urban growth boundary. Don’t get me wrong, I totally agree that they are a necessary part of creating viable space for dense human populations and industrial use. I worry about the maintenance of these smaller development-based areas. Sure they’ll do a great job of providing habitat, but for what?

In the same way that a casual pile of anything burnable is not a burn pile, letting anything that will grow to maturity and propagate does not create a livable landscape or recreate habitat.

Human intervention is required to create a sustainable environment. There are few places on the earth where only native species remain if any such place could ever be so defined. ANY untended piece of land (or anything left outside) will start growing stuff as soon as the rains begin and will probably be some shade of green before next summer. Left untended, these pseudo-wild places (or your yard) will be overwhelmed with dense prickly impenetrable mixed species brush, probably mostly invasive non-native weeds. Certain creatures that like to live in densely brushy places are not welcome within our homes, whether urban or rural.

The first fall storms have arrived. Raking leaves off the grass and starting to think about what I want to cut back or out got me thinking again about how hard it might be to understand why I’m always talking about killing off plants [and bugs and rodents and mollusks and fungi]. In an effort to help folks envision the mass of stuff Dennis and I attempt to manage, I’m going to describe our various piles. On our (almost) four acres, about one-quarter acre is fenced off to keep the chickens and cows contained in the barnyard, pasture and forest that shares the rest of the land.

We have a designated area (away from buildings, reachable by hose) where windfall and woody debris are collected for our annual brush fire. This year’s burn pile is the biggest since we ‘remodeled’ the house. It’s at least 10 feet high and quite dense, since we build and burn only a single pile each year. It could easily be much larger, since there’s a good deal of thinning and other small saw work that should happen in the front hedge and fruit trees.

Besides the burn pile, there is the large (approx. 8’x8’) bin where cardboard, manure, kitchen waste, yard debris and anything else we think will decay (one year an old cotton futon) is more or less layered up and worked constantly by the chickens. Every couple of years the whole batch has to be moved to the garden when it’s mostly decomposed and overtaking the bin. We rake the leaves in the front yard, and if we get it all done, use them to pretty much cover the vegetable garden AND the edges of the perennial beds.

During the growing season, most of the weeds from perennial beds and garden get pitched over the fence. I have a small (about five feet around and up to four feet high) pile for weeds and debris that I don’t want to compost (or that I don’t want to yard all the way back to the big pile).

I don’t have a good estimate of the actual annual volume of all this stuff, but the effort is continuous. And its not as if the front is neat and tidy, even with good mulch there are lots of weeds to be pulled and I haven’t even started on cutting back perennials for the winter.

So far I’ve dealt with the plants, but there are also some creatures you learn to live with if you live close to wildness. As the cold returns, insects and rodents are looking for nice warm winter

homes, and they would really like to live with you! Frankly, I don’t care to share. Fleas and ticks come in on dogs and cats; I try to keep the flea meds up to date. My youngest daughter was trying to do the right thing by applying grocery store flea stuff, but seizures started almost immediately and eventually the poor pet died, a very traumatic experience for us all. Now I get the most effective stuff we can afford from the vet.

We also have regular infestations of carpenter ants which we control by using flea bombs in the crawl space. When it gets BAD I apply a broad range insecticide (hopefully with a growth inhibitor) both inside and outside the house. After it dries, the product works as a contact poison for about six-months and has been remarkably effective at controlling the ant population that is always trying to move in.

Also trying to move in are the small ‘meadow mice’, which are actually voles. Interesting factoid: No matter where you are there are almost certainly several rodents within 10 feet of you at all times! Mice and rats are famous for their capacity to carry disease and can create a big mess. Since I learned that the dead mice are not poisonous to cats, I rotate two different kinds of solid bait in the house because trapping, alone, was not effective. That becomes obvious when all the bait stations are empty.

These small rodents can also cause problems in the garden. While they don’t tunnel themselves, they use tunnels in the ground made by moles and gophers, and they love to burrow around and under mulch or landscape fabric or snow. They will nest up against small trees if there is mulch or fabric to hide under. The inner bark (cambium) of the tree becomes a tasty and convenient food source. If the tree is small they can girdle it completely and kill it. Holes in the bark provide access to all kinds of incest and diseases.

Finally, there are the larger vertebrate forest dwellers that even urban residents find themselves faced with as we integrate the landscape into a sustainable whole. There are several species of native squirrel and rabbit. There are larger animals, like deer and elk, and lots of midsize ones, including opossums and porcupines. [In case you don’t believe we have porcupines, I spent one Saturday having the vet take quills out of the dog’s poor nose.] While I haven’t heard of aggressive rabbits, squirrels and raccoons can become extremely aggressive when denied food, particularly if habituated to food being provided by people. Teach your kids that animals are WILD, are ‘cute’ only at a distance, and that feeding wild animals is NOT A Good Idea! One local woman was nearly killed by a raccoon, it took a year before she was able to walk!

Birds and bats are generally good for the yard and garden. Starlings, however, are not native, make a huge noisy, mess nesting, and use resources needed by native species. You don’t want starlings nesting in your house, so close up any unnecessary openings. Remember, any animal acting in an unusual way, for example a bat on the ground during the day, may have rabies – still an extremely dangerous and contagious disease.

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NEHALEM VALLEY BIBLE CHURCH Gary Taylor, Pastor Grant & North Streets, Vernonia 503 429-5378 Sunday School 10:00 a.m. Morning Worship 11:00 a.m. Nursery available Wednesday Service 7:00 p.m.	SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST Gary S. Walter, Pastor 2nd Ave. and Nehalem St., Vernonia 503 429-8301 Morning Worship, 11:00 a.m. Sabbath School 9:30 a.m.	FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH 359 “A” Street, Vernonia 503 429-5190 Sunday School 9:45 a.m. Sunday Worship Service 11:00 a.m. Wednesday Prayer Meeting 7:00 p.m.
VERNONIA FOURSQUARE CHURCH Carl Pense, Pastor 850 Madison Avenue, Vernonia 503 429-1103 Sunday Worship Service: 10:30 a.m. Children’s Sunday School	ASSEMBLY OF GOD Wayne and Maureen Marr 662 Jefferson Ave., Vernonia, 503 429-0373 Sunday School 9:45 a.m. Morning Worship 11:00 a.m.	ST. MARY’S CATHOLIC CHURCH Rev. Luan Tran, Administrator 960 Missouri Avenue, Vernonia 503 429-8841 Mass Sunday 12:00 Noon Religious Educ. Sunday 10:30 a.m.
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