

NEWS FROM THE SMALL FARM PROGRAM AT CORNELL

TOPIC: Managing Unconventional Resources: Hedging Your Bets with Hedgerows PR
DATE: For immediate release February 10, 2005
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Managing Unconventional Resources: Hedging Your Bets with Hedgerows
By: David R. Reid

Well-managed hedgerows provide aesthetic and economic advantages on a small farm:

- Natural barriers between farm and neighbors
- Cover for birds and wildlife
- A Source of firewood and timber
- Paddock divisions for intensive grazing

Some 34 years ago the farm service agent and I stood in her office looking at the aerial photographs of my farm. We could see long wide shadows protruding into the lighter space of meadows. The shadows bulked wide as my thumb and grew darker at their centers.

"Your farm," she said, "is remarkable for its hedgerows." I knew she wasn't recognizing an advantageous feature. We both knew that those wide bands of shadow designated unproductive land.

Back on the farm those bands of darkness loomed larger than shadows. Some of them spread 30 feet from side to side. Originally, they had separated fields into paddocks workable by hand labor, horses, and horse-drawn machinery. Now, left to nature's prolific processes over the years, they threatened to take over the meadows and return the farm to its wilderness origins.

One could see how they had developed. The land is stony. In preparing the fields for planting, the first settlers had used the stone to advantage. They marked out 3-5 acres in fields and then stacked the "free" stone to designate their boundaries. The newly formed strips of stone became property lines, or foundations for fences to pasture animals.

Stonewalls, maintained and kept in place, were then an asset. But left to the upheaval of freezing winters, they spilled away from their anchorage. This, coupled with less disciplined farming practices of succeeding generations,

caused them to sprawl. Stone was not stacked but merely dragged or dumped near the walls.

Over time the outlying stones became traps for seeds of bushes and trees in the Fall. Come spring, the reforestation process began with the sprouting of seedlings protected by rock. Add 50 years, with more of the same careless stewardship, and these resulting mini-forests changed the character of the farm. It had become chaotically disorganized and unproductive.

Hedgerows had been a nuisance to some progressive farmers of my father's time. A friend of ours from Oswego County removed all of the hedgerows on the farm he bought from his father in the 1950s. He loved to "crow" about how he could plow, mow, or chop without turning for half a mile. But he also lamented the force of the wind-sweep beating his barn in winter, and he cautioned me about stripping my farm of the hedgerows: "It costs a lot of money to take them out."

Still, I had to develop a plan that would economically reclaim acres of unproductive land. Some of the hedgerows I removed. I paid the price for a bulldozer and backhoe and extricated an island of trees and rocks from a 6-acre meadow. It was worth the price. Working around that island had required hours of time and it wasted gallons of fuel. Eliminating this obstacle gave me a 7.5-acre field, which worked efficiently, and in turn yielded more crop. The remaining hedgerows, however, were left in place, for economic and aesthetic reasons. For example, when I spoke of removing one hedgerow we viewed from our kitchen window, my wife said, "I wish you wouldn't do it. I don't want this place to look like Iowa."

Thus our "compromise" strategy over the years has been to manage the hedgerows. We have thinned out the hardwoods for firewood and logs, cut or "bush hogged" the weed trees, and pushed up the stones into more narrowly defined rows.

The process began with the pasturing of beef cattle. I ran a single electric wire around the perimeter of the meadows and let the beefers shoulder and rub their way through the vines, thorns, and interwoven thickets. This created paths that made these jungles more accessible. Then the wood cutting began. White ash and cherry had thrived in this environment and consequently produced a fire wood supply of 30 face cords a year, which continues to this day. Of course, the active cutting of wood and timber meant the thinning of choke cherry, prickly ash, grape vine, and box alder.

The first result was sunlight slicing through the dark, leave-laced labyrinth of rock and vegetation. With a tractor and hydraulic loader I pushed stone up onto the original walls. These actions reclaimed at least an acre of land in each meadow. Not only did I acquire more productive land, I also gained breeze and ventilation.

It became easier to dry hay in each meadow as there was less overhang and the prevailing winds blew freely through the curing windrows.

Today the hedgerows on our farm are much thinner. We have better-ventilated, larger, and more productive meadows. We are thankful for the barriers between us and the encroaching spread of manufactured houses. We continue cutting firewood for the long winters, and use the natural divisions of meadows for rotational grazing. In the fall, deer glide along the sharp shadows and stand in our gun sights. The hedgerows provide hot fires and venison, nurturing our spirits from November to spring.

When my son was studying biology at Cornell University he made the observation that "Nature is programmed for chaos." From working with hedgerows I knew precisely what he meant. Working in, through, and around them has allowed me to practice chaos theory: creating order from a natural process gone wild.

David Reid farms 200 acres in Adams Center, Jefferson County, NY. This article first appeared in the Summer 2004 edition of Small Farm Quarterly. For more information on a variety of small farm topics, visit www.smallfarms.cornell.edu.

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The following PHOTO is available at www.smallfarms.cornell.edu. Click on News Room.

summer light 2.jpg

Caption: Hedgerows and hayfields on the author's farm.

Photographer: Judson Reid