

COPPICING: the practicalities

New woodland owners hear a great deal about coppicing. Is it a good idea? How difficult is it? What tools do you need? In the second part of his introduction to coppicing, Guy Lambourne offers practical advice and guidance on how to get started.

What to coppice

Few conifers coppice successfully, so I'm talking throughout about broadleaved trees. If your wood has areas where there are lots of trees with multiple stems that are perhaps up to 50 years old, growing from single stumps or stools, you can assume coppicing has been carried out there in the past and its reintroduction or continuation could be a sensible option. If the wood includes areas of fairly young (again up to 50 years) broadleaf plantation, coppicing might be a workable option.

How large an area?

For several reasons, coppicing needs scale. Firstly, those newly cut stools require direct sunlight to grow vigorously, and that means cutting a reasonable area to reduce the proportion of shady edges, especially when cutting within a larger woodland. Second, if you have deer locally (and you probably do) it's the edges that suffer the worst browsing – small areas have a relatively large proportion of edges. Third, there's not much coming out of a wood that's very valuable on its own. For anything like a commercial approach, you'll need a lot of whatever you produce. Your woodland could yield a huge range of woody excitement – don't discount bean poles, pea sticks, spars or besom brooms, for example (depending on the species of trees and their past

management). But for many readers, firewood logs might be the most likely product that would have a ready use both on site and in your home. With some planning, advertising and the right dry storage, it could bring in a little extra cash.

The area of woodland you need depends on a range of factors. There are no hard and fast rules, but consider the scale of your ambition, how big your wood is, what you want out of it and what species are present. The closer the trees are together and the shorter the rotation, the smaller the

area that can be seen as viable.

For the reasons given above, very small-scale coppicing is unlikely to be greatly successful. One domestic hearth probably won't need enough firewood to justify coppicing, but if you use a lot of logs and fancy selling logs on a small scale, a small wood could do the job. Species often grown for firewood – sweet chestnut, oak or hornbeam (and of course ash until about seven or eight years ago), will need longer to grow and therefore a larger area to make a complete rotation, unlike hazel which is cut every 7-10 years. A 20-year rotation needs 20 coupes if you want a supply every year. Forest Research has suggested 0.5 hectares (1.2 acres)¹ as a minimum for a coupe, so for a 20-year rotation, 10 hectares might be required. Oaks and Mills² suggest 0.25 hectares as a minimum and my experience suggests this is about right. Make your coupes as big and as square as possible.





Old ash and field maple stools coppiced after 21 years for firewood logs and charcoal.

Coupes and mapping

The word coppice comes from the French word *couper*, meaning to cut. Historically, coppice came to mean a patch of woodland that was cut on a rotation of anything between five and 35 years. Today, woodland owners and managers are advised to make a plan of their woodland – anything from a sketch to a fancier computer-generated map – to provide details of the areas to be cut and the species of the trees within it. If the wood has a management plan, that will provide a map of the total area within the wood to be coppiced and probably the detail of the coupes.

Walk around your wood and try to design the coupes on a map, ensuring they are as equal in area as possible. Each coupe will need ride access, preferably without having to pass through other coupes, and ideally a similar tree mix in them all. By making your coupes as square as possible, you'll not only give the trees a good chance, but it will be easier to realise your plans on the ground. Mark the corners with something fairly permanent, such as large stakes, painted rocks or by spraying marker trees, and don't fret if it all doesn't go exactly to plan. It will evolve over the years and some coupes might expand or contract depending on the trees within them or the time you have available each winter.

Tools, training and safety

Don't underestimate the scale of time and effort required for coppicing: it is very labour-intensive and can become an enjoyable monster of a hobby. I would suggest spending time with someone who is working coppice before you do anything. This might be an eye-opener. As well as your time and muscle power, there is a fair amount of equipment and expertise needed. Chainsaws are noisy and smelly, but for anything other than a tiny scale, are fairly essential.

Good quality tools cost – buy the best you can afford and if you plan to use a chainsaw you must have completed the right training and acquire the appropriate personal protective equipment. And all that costs too. With or without a chainsaw you will need a few hand tools, such as a bow saw, loppers, an axe and a billhook, but you must also have a hard hat, safety boots and lots of strong gloves. If you need it, get some training in the use and maintenance of hand tools – it can look deceptively easy. A sharp tool used effectively will save an awful lot of time and strain, not to mention the potential for accidents.

Even on the smallest of scales, starting coppicing or indeed any work in a wood, brings you into the world of forestry and that can be a dangerous place. Make sure you and others involved are working safely. A site and activity risk assessment is essential for anything commercial and, at the very least, you should devise an emergency plan. First aid training and a well-stocked first aid kit are essential too.

Challenges to coppicing

Coppicing is not without its challenges. Increasing deer numbers, particularly muntjac and fallow, with no natural predators, can quickly destroy the young, tender growth in a coppice plot. At best this produces poor quality regrowth but at worse, stools will die. There is an ever-increasing list of tree pests and diseases in the UK including some, such as ash dieback and Phytophthora, which threaten important coppice species. Coppicing is a long-term commitment and, in common with pretty much all aspects of forestry, requires a faith in the future and a vision of continuity. It can be difficult for coppice workers to secure access and cutting rights from woodland owners,



over the required long time frames. And that's where members of SWOG and the National Coppice Federation might be able to scratch each others' backs.

Further advice and help

Any owner of a woodland should consider writing a woodland management plan, which spells out ten years' management and if the wood is over three hectares, can be developed in partnership with Forestry England (FE). If developed with FE, it also includes the felling licence you probably require for felling anything other than a small volume of wood. Contact your local FE office to find out more.

If you are keen to introduce or continue a coppice rotation in your woodland, but lack the time, fitness or expertise, contact your local NCFed group representative for advice. There is no standard form or financial arrangement for working with group members – perhaps woodlands are too variable for this to be possible – but there is a huge amount of expertise and experience among the members. There might be one just around the corner who would be able to offer advice or perhaps work with or for you in exchange for money, wood or other non-financial benefits.

References

1. Harmer, R.; *Restoration of Neglected Hazel Coppice*, pub. Forest Research, 2004
2. Oaks, R. & Mills E. *Coppicing & Coppice Crafts, a Comprehensive Guide*, Crowood, 2013

RESOURCES

Find your local NCFed group at ncfed.org.uk/about/groups
Or email enquiries@ncfed.org.uk

GUY LAMBOURNE chairs the East Anglian Coppice Network. He and his partner Jane run a small coppicing and farming business in Bedfordshire, selling hazel and willow products. Jane is also a storyteller and environmental education practitioner
wassledine.co.uk

Above: Trimming hazel hedge stakes to length in a 20 year old hazel plantation. Hedge binders to the right and pea sticks in bundles in the background.

Below: The tools of the trade: chainsaw, hand axe and billhook. Protective headgear and ear defenders are just a small part of the protective gear needed when operating a chainsaw.

