

Battling Buckthorn

By Gloria Hildebrandt

This year I haven't been good about working on our Buckthorn problem. The only two seasons that are suitable for eliminating them are spring and fall, when it's not so hot out and the earth is damp enough for the roots to be pulled out. It's also helpful that they're easily visible in the late fall, as they keep their green leaves longer than most other trees. I was preoccupied in spring with my garden.

Merely cutting down Buckthorn is not ideal. While it will stop the "mother trees" from producing berries, the trees will sucker into a bush that will make uprooting them later, almost impossible. If you cut down a Buckthorn, there are only two ways of permanently dealing with it. One is to smother the stump with thick black plastic that will prevent it from regrowing. You have to put the plastic on very securely, and you may have to keep it on for a few years. The other option is to apply a strong herbicide carefully to the cut surfaces. This may kill it or set back its growth, but you have to keep an eye on it for a few years as it too, can sucker and regrow.

The solution that Mike and I prefer is to uproot Buckthorn. I mean pull the whole plant out of the ground with its roots. Whatever its size! What we call baby Buckthorn, little seedlings no more than about two feet high, can often be pulled by hand. Sometimes they break off leaving roots in the ground, but I usually pull them out, until my gloved hand hurts so much that I have to rest it.

Heavy-duty Tools

Bigger saplings can be levered out of the ground by a weed



Tools for removing Buckthorn. Left, the Extractigator. Attached to the tree, the cable puller. Mike is using the farm jack.

wrench. We use a strong one from a B.C. company, that's called the Extractigator, which we learned about at Willow Park Ecology Centre in Norval. It usually works well to pull the tree out by its roots although it too, sometimes snaps the tree off without getting the roots. I can successfully work the Extractigator except for the bigger, more stubborn plants.

Full-grown Buckthorn trees are another story. For these Mike uses his tractor and a chain to pull them out. Sometimes they come out relatively easily with a few good tugs. Sometimes Mike will use the front bucket to push the tree forward and back, loosening it in the ground, and then pulling it out. The front bucket has limitations on how much it can pull. Also, if the shrub is in the forest, a lot of damage can be done to the surrounding grounds and

plants that we want to keep.

Other times call for a heavy-duty jack that Mike uses to force the tree straight up out of the ground. He assembled a farm jack, a ground plate to distribute the load over a wider area, a piece of timber as an angled upright support and a heavy chain to connect the shrub to the jack.

A third method is to use a cable puller. Mike attaches it to a nearby tree as an anchor, using a wrap-around tow strap to protect the tree, and a chain around the shrub. He ratchets it out of the ground. Further in the forest, the cable-puller and farm jack methods seem to work the best.

It's awesome to see a Buckthorn slowly being ripped out of the ground, swinging high from a chain. Mike then bashes the root ball by hand with a shovel or a 4x4 piece of wood to get soil and rocks to fall off, making the tree lighter to move.

But even after being uprooted from the ground, the places where Buckthorn grew, need to be monitored for a few years, in case any roots that have broken off and remain in the ground, start to regrow.

Discarding Buckthorn is another concern. We have seen uprooted Buckthorns that were left lying on the ground, take root and grow. We pile them in a massive pile close to the barn and deal with them later. The thick trunks of Buckthorn can be cut up for firewood, generating good heat from its extreme hardness and density. The smaller, annoyingly thorny branches and sapling stems can be left to dry and then be chipped or burned in a fire pit.

Even should we ever finish battling Buckthorn, we have a list of other invasives to deal with. And we dread learning about new enemies on the land.