

## Hang ups are related to ignorance

By Curtis Seltzer

**BLUE GRASS, Va.**—Experience always comes at a price. Ignorance never rides free. Farming has taught me both.

Twenty-five years ago, I built fence in our cattle pastures to reconfigure two large fields into 15 small paddocks. My objective was to build the infrastructure for a rotational-grazing system, which gangs cattle in a small paddock and then shifts them into a fresh paddock every three or four days. The forage in each paddock grows for at least 30 days before its next munch.

I've found that rotational grazing is more efficient than turning cattle loose in large fields. It forces them to eat all the forage in each paddock, including the greenery they find less to their liking. It produces more pounds of weight gain per acre.

Instead of carrying 30 steers from spring to fall on 70 acres under the old plan, I normally run 55 to 65, depending on their size at turn out. Each animal gains less during those six months, but overall the farm can produce almost twice as much weight gain as before. That's about 14,500 to 17,500 pounds of herd gain versus about 9,000 at roughly \$1.50 per pound.

The cattle are healthier, because they are constantly moving into fresh grass that's not fouled by their manure and intestinal parasites. Weeds are eaten rather than sprayed or bushhogged. For these reasons, the animals need less doctoring for worms and pinkeye. Soil erosion is reduced, because the boys are not allowed to loaf in one or two favorite shady hangouts all summer, which teenage boys tend to do.

But rotational grazing requires building and maintaining a lot of interior fence lines.

I used smooth, high-tensile wire for interior fence. It's easily repaired and lasts longer than the alternatives. Each of the nine strands includes an in-line mechanical ratchet -- called a "strainer" -- for tightening.

Fence posts at corners and terminals (where a fence line ends) come under much strain from nine ratchets constantly pulling at them. Knowing no better, we braced the corners and terminals in the same manner that we would have braced non-tensioned woven wire.

Big mistake. Many corner and terminal posts have partially lifted out of the ground over the years and now slant toward the ratchets rather than stand vertical.

They now need to be reset or replaced. And they need to be double braced—three heavy posts set eight feet apart with two horizontal wood brace beams between them.

I now know that end posts under tension have to be extra-large in diameter and nine-feet long so that they can be pounded in to a depth of four feet instead of the normal three

To my knowledge, I was the first person in my community to install this system. I've received its benefits, but this year I have to pay the cost of my ignorance by resetting corner and end posts. This is both expensive and not fun.

I estimated that I'll need about 50 nine-foot-long end posts, each at least eight inches in diameter and weighing between 200 and 300 pounds.

Normal people would buy treated pine posts for \$30 each and have them delivered.

Instead, I went into the woods this week and started cutting yellow locust trees. To get 50 posts, I'll have to cut 15 trees, which I will buck up to nine-foot lengths. Locust should last longer than store-bought treated pine.

Whether this is a cheaper alternative depends on whether or not I end up in the hospital.

The phrase, "hang up," can mean everything from an incident that you can't get over which influences the rest of your life to a rude exiting of an unwanted phone conversation.

In the woods, it has a literal meaning. When a tree I cut doesn't fall to the ground, it's hung up.

I am acquainted with two kinds of self-inflicted tree hang-ups.

The first occurs when I have properly notched the tree at the stump and have finished the cut from behind...and the tree doesn't fall. Instead, it stands perfectly erect, because its tippy-top branches are intertwined with the tippy-top branches of neighboring trees that hold it in place.

A variation of this hang-up occurs when the wind rises and pushes the tree in the opposite direction of its intended line of fall. This is called, "sit back," a first cousin to "hang up." I've had trees become perfectly balanced in a sit back, even though they're totally severed from their stumps. Tippy-top branches, once again, win Oscars in supporting roles.

The other hang up occurs when a cut tree falls but gets stuck in another tree, leaving its top wedged in a neighbor's crotch at something like a 45-degree angle. This crotch hang up, too, I am familiar with—in trees, not neighbors.

It often happens that a hung-up tree is not through with me. In making a cut at the stump, a tree partial to hanging up might pinch my chainsaw, clamping both blade and chain in a death grip under weight and tension.

There are several steps to freeing a pinched chainsaw.

The first, which I highly recommend, is to swear at the both the tree and the saw. Swearing alone, however, never frees a chainsaw completely. But I never skip this step, which I consider to be time well spent in planning and analysis.

The second step I use is to berate myself for getting caught in a trap that I knew was waiting to spring. I admit that self-flagellation makes my soul more limber, but, it, too, fails to free the chainsaw.

But no one should skip this step, because it releases testosterone and other toxins needed for the next steps.

The third step is to kick the stump. Stump-kicking when done properly results in a stubbed toe at the very least, which allows me to hobble away from the hang up. I've converted several psychiatrists to recommending foot therapy of this type.

The fourth step for freeing a chainsaw is to get the upright tree to fall. This always works.

The first thing I do is unbolt the chainsaw's powerhead (motor) from the pinched blade and chain. I then bolt on a spare blade and chain. This saves the costly powerhead from being mashed while giving me fresh opportunities to bind my spares.

I actually carry five spare blades and chains, because I never know when I'll find myself in more than one pinch. I've had several two-pinch trees, and I've heard of a three pincher.

Once the powerhead is out of the picture, I can hammer plastic or steel wedges into the cut (kerf) to prop the tree into leaning in the direction that it's supposed to fall. Sometimes this works, and other times, I end up with the blade and chain pinched ever tighter along with all my wedges.

In this situation, the wisest course of action is to go home. Gravity usually works. In a couple of days, the tree will be on the ground and my gravity-freed equipment will be waiting for me at the stump.

In these predicaments, I try to avoid "stump jump, which is a catch-all term for the butt of a falling tree kicking back, twisting or in some other way doing what I don't expect.

Properly cut trees fall slowly at first, giving me time to get clear. But hung-up trees can be spring-loaded at the butt. When tension is suddenly released, a big butt can kick out faster than I can react. I've found that leaders of certain organizations do the same.

The safest way to drop a hung-up tree is to position a truck or tractor on its far side, hook a chain to the butt and pull it down so that it falls safely and more or less in the general direction of the original plan.

The least safe way is to cut nine-foot-long sections out of the hung-up tree. You have to hold the chainsaw above your shoulders, which is a big, unsafe no-no, and you often pinch the chainsaw.

When such a cut is completed, the nine-foot-long bolt tries to land on your foot while the still hung tree swings its new butt around like a go-go dancer. Only really stupid people do this. I need not share how I've arrived at this conclusion.

I take some comfort in knowing that even professional loggers create their own hang ups from time to time.

From these experiences in fencing and post gathering, I draw two lessons.

First, ignorance always exacts a price.

And, second, I am responsible for fixing my own hang ups.

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