

Trees prefer falling on roads

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—We are in the sinks of August. The dog days. The time of thistle and teasel.

Except, this year, mid-August feels more like mid-September, while July felt more like August and June felt like July. The 2012 calendar's been running at least a month fast.

It's not uncommon for Blue Grass to be dry in August. We've had a couple of spells since the early 1980s that sapped our spirits and left our tongues dragging on the ground.

More than one half of the land mass of the continental U.S. is beset with moderate to extreme drought this year. Abnormally dry conditions have beset some areas of the South and Midwest for several years. Thirty-six states are projecting water shortages for 2013.

This year, however, rains have thundered through Blue Grass over the last several weeks, greening up our pastures and producing a fairyland in our woods of rarely seen mushrooms, fungi and slimes. (I accept that a few readers may not share my excitement over a Green-headed Jelly Club or a row of Fetid Marasmius. I offer no judgment about these outliers.)

I've been tramping through these woodland exotics because last month's *derecho* broke the weak tops of a couple of dozen trees and spitefully deposited them athwart the forest trails I maintain. (I've finally found a spot in the game for "athwart," which has ridden my bench without complaint for five years and 246 columns. Mine, however, doesn't measure up to Alexander Pope's: "Pursue the Stars that shoot athwart the night.")

Clearing one fallen tree is not too bad a job. But whacking around in the middle of three or four that have become socially networked is.

Sawing through a branch that is pinned under weight can release a spring-loaded club that will knock you flat. Fallen trees also like to capture your chainsaw in a compression pinch. This produces the kind of linguistic elegance that would brighten any family-oriented newspaper.

One snaggle of five wind-dropped trees blocked a major "T" intersection. (I'm using the word "major" in context. It's not Broadway and 42nd Street.) The main road was blocked by three falls, and the feeder secondary on a

steep slope was clogged with two blowdowns entwined with each other like a couple of 16-year-olds on their first make-out date.

I don't know how others do it, but I approach complex tree tangles incrementally. I work from the tippy-tops back toward the 20"-thick stems.

I don't try to make one heroic cut with my chainsaw that will inspire a thousand years of song and saga.

Clearing up this mess is dangerous and unpleasant, much like solving our federal budget problems. The limbs that you're removing can bite you if you just wade in and start cutting willy-nilly. The little stuff is whippy, and even twigs cling to each other like Velcro. The big stuff likes to stay put, but can move in an eye blink as it's sawn. Consequences follow from every cut: some can be anticipated; others are a surprise.

I try to push a safe working space into the heart of each mess slowly, clearing the cut branches as I go. I salvage as much as possible for lumber or firewood. I stack the unusable branches in piles for critter comforts rather than leave them lying around to ambush my ankles after I've forgotten about them. Letting chips stay where they fall can cost an arm and a leg in the long run.

Reopening forest roads after a windstorm is a recurring chore. I've found it best to just do it and confine my grumbling to the printed page, which is less and less printed these days...and thus presents another item for grumbo-jumbo.

"Keeping up" a farm against the elements is usually a matter of one step back and then two sideways. I consider forward progress to be staying even at most, and, more often than not, simply losing ground slower than I expected.

Now that the months are arriving ahead of schedule, things on the farm will start falling apart sooner and faster.

If I could, I would stand athwart these daggers of entropy.

William F. Buckley promised in 1955 that his new magazine, National Review, would stand "athwart history, yelling Stop, at a time when no one is inclined to do so, or to have much patience with those who so urge it." I never figured out how even a Buckley could stop history, but you have to admire the vision of a guy who chooses to yell at something he can't control rather than one who spends his time quibbling with trees in his road.

As I write, Nellie, our Yellow Lab, lies athwart my feet and seems puzzled by the commotion she senses above her.

I share her concern.

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