



Dead Wood

Snags, logs and dead woody debris, or simply “dead wood,” are natural occurrences in mature forests and a sign of health and vigor.

Why keep dead wood in the forest?

Snags (standing dead or dying trees), downed twigs and logs provide critical wildlife habitat in the urban forest. Wildlife use dead wood for nesting, roosting, foraging, perching and/or territorial displays. On dead trees, woodpeckers will forage for insects and create nest cavities. Foxes, squirrels and chipmunks may seek shelter in hollowed logs. Salamanders and smaller animals use downed logs as cover from predators and the sun. Insects, fungi and lichens are also dependent on dead wood for food and shelter.

Can't it be cleaned up a little?

What might be a “mess” to the human aesthetic is actually very beneficial for the parts of the forest that we value. Forests on parkland are not meant to look like a backyard, but rather to be managed for the benefit of our natural resources. Scattered limbs and logs make better shelters for wildlife. Decaying logs provide substrate for the various and brightly colored fungi. Dead wood decays in place, helping to maintain the carbon and nutrients in the forests and to build fertile soils. Logs and limbs can slow down soil erosion, thus helping to keep water clean. Without getting too complicated, today's dead wood helps regenerate tomorrow's forests.

Won't it attract rodents or termites?

Certain types of wildlife attracted to a tree cavity may be undesirable to people. But many of these creatures form the bottom of the food chain, which in turn allows more attractive wildlife to thrive in parks, too. Careful consideration is given to each park to ensure that there are no unsafe conditions being promoted by the park.

So what does the Park Authority recommend?

If the dead tree, by falling or dropping a limb, is in any way a danger, remove the tree. Sometimes, it is best to chip the wood (speeds decay and soil building) and sometimes to leave the logs in place (promotes wildlife habitat). Often, the equipment used for any activity with trees is large, so

potential damage from the equipment must be weighed against the benefit to the park. Whenever possible, the positive impacts of leaving dead wood in place as a snag or downed logs should be considered. Remember, in Fairfax County, a downed log or tree is the responsibility of the property owner of where the tree lies, not where the roots are.

If not you, who? Small things.

◆ **Leave the sticks and logs where they lay.** Collecting firewood from parkland is prohibited by regulation. Leaving dead wood in place is important for creating wildlife habitat and promoting nutrient cycling.

If not you, who? Big things.

◆ **Promote wildlife.** Do you have a big tree (greater than 10 inches in diameter) that needs to come down? Instead of removing it entirely, consider making it a snag by leaving 10 to 20 feet of it standing.

If not you, who? Big things.

◆ **Create habitat.** Brush piles near the forest edge are attractive habitat for small mammals, amphibians and reptiles. Placed in a sunny spot about 15 feet from the edge of the forest, they can provide valuable habitat. Dumping of brush and leaves in the forest can have the opposite effect because decay of these piles steals oxygen and moisture from tree roots and will eventually kill the tree.



Care, Educate, Inspire

Stewardship is about working together to care for the environmental and cultural resources of Fairfax County. People become stewards for different reasons. They may want to help ensure clean water and air. They may wish to share something with their children. They may be inspired by spiritual beliefs. Whatever prompts our commitment, it is easy to take an active role in stewardship. It can be a small and simple thing, or it can be much bigger. Either way, it all adds up to a Fairfax County that looks to its past with pride and to its future with confidence.

You can learn more about Fairfax County Stewardship, the Board of Supervisors' 20-year environmental vision and the Fairfax County Park Authority at www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/stewardship or call 703-324-8674



A publication of
Fairfax County, Virginia



If accommodations or alternative formats are needed, please call Inclusion and ADA Support at 703-324-8563. TTY 703-803-3354.



Printed on recycled paper with soy inks.

6/07