Coppicing

By Tim Murphy

Coppicing is a useful and sustainable way to manage certain renewable perennial plant resources. In practice, stems or trunks of appropriate species are cut when they reach a desired diameter. For example, a 4" oak or honey locust trunk would make an ideal fuel log, a 6" to 8" black locust trunk a premium fence post, and a 1/2" willow or squaw bush twig excellent basketry material. The stump then regenerates, often with multiple trunks, and growth proceeds at a more rapid rate because of plant nature and an already extensive root system.

These are some factors which determine suitable species:

Readily able to regenerate after a severe cut back. *Coppice species often regenerate more rapidly with each cutting due to an ever expanding root system.*

Rapid growth and ease of establishment. *Often desirable trees can be started from cuttings--very inexpensive.*

From a permacultural perspective, each "element" (in this case a tree or shrub) is chosen for its ability to meet as many needs as possible. Example: a honey locust is drought hardy and fast growing, stabilizes, penetrates and builds soil, casts a filtered shade in temperate and hot months and minimal shade in winter, has pods that serve as food or fodder, yields a fine hardwood, and is adaptable to coppicing.

In temperate climates, a plot 65' square can provide a continuous supply of fuel to cook for a family of four. Arid regions may require wider spacing in the coppice lot, and a correspondingly larger area.

Often coppicing is practiced alongside standard sized trees or in systems where only a part of the crop is harvested at any one time. It is an ancient technique that has been employed by various cultures, globally, for thousands of years, and a practice ideally suited to sustainable living systems.

Prescott Poplar Coppice

By Tim Murphy

I recently stayed with an old friend while in Central Arizona, and he asked if I'd like to visit a site that had fascinated him from a distance for quite a while.

On a couple of acres, not too far from the center of Prescott, a retired California couple lives in a modest bungalow behind what appears to be a coarse hedge. The bright green growth serves to buffer the home from wind and traffic. A close look reveals neat stacks of sorted cord wood and bundles of kindling faggots, all coppiced from the vigorous poplar and cottonwood rows.

We approached and introduced ourselves. Graciously consenting to share her time with us, the soft spoken partner proudly recounted how she and her husband had, years before, planted cuttings from trees that line a nearby drainage. They were unable to find references to assist them in their plan, but hoped to supplement their winter heat with home-grown fuel wood.

Initially, as they shaped the habit of their hedge, they saved only the larger prunings; the twigs were burned annually as rubbish. A city ordinance forbidding that practice spurred them to create a resource from a problem. The solution was a simple and effective device made with bicycle gearing and plywood, used to bind the twigs into a fast burning, easily handled kindling package.

Prolonged observation and reflection deter protracted thoughtless labor and waste--a basic principle of permacultural practice.

We talked about other coppicing alternatives, including a possible intercrop, and then, after viewing their robust raspberry patch, my friend and I thanked our hosts for their willingness to share their experience, and said good bye.