

Conservation Connection:
Forest Management on Weston Conservation Land
By Laurie Bent, Weston Conservation Commission Chair

Why has the Weston Conservation Commission contracted with Lands' Sake to cut firewood in Town forests?

Sometimes people who walk in the Weston forests are surprised to see that Lands' Sake, under contract with the Conservation Commission, is cutting trees for firewood. Lands' Sake has been doing this for a long time—since 1981, to be precise. Wood harvesting is part of the Commission's plan to keep our forests diverse and healthy, to provide forestry educational opportunities to students and interested residents, and to reap a modest economic benefit from this renewable local resource. Through the Lands' Sake forestry project, the Commission hopes to show that suburban forests can simultaneously provide wildlife habitat, aesthetic beauty for residents to enjoy, and economic value through locally harvested wood products. (Lands' Sake's maple sugar project is another sustainable activity conducted in our local forests. Check the Lands' Sake website landssake.org for information about maple syrup activities.)

A forest is a dynamic ecosystem. Older trees die off or are harvested, and young trees grow up to fill the holes in the canopy. Even without wood harvesting, forests change due to natural disturbances caused by storms, insects, disease, and fire. Forests also experience ecosystem succession, the process by which the type of plants found in an area evolve over time. For example, as one type of tree colonizes an area, its very success alters the local conditions of soil moisture, soil fertility, and sunlight availability. Conditions are further affected by variability in climate, weather, and seed production. All of these forces create new conditions that may better suit a different tree species, which then replaces the previously dominant species.

Humans have also affected the extent and composition of forests in New England continuously since their arrival over ten thousand years ago. Native Americans cleared small areas of the forest for food production. Starting in the 1600's, European colonists cleared land for farms, using the wood they felled as building material, heating fuel, and export product. By the 1880s about 42 percent of New England was cleared. The stone walls visible in Weston's woods silently testify to the sweaty labor of the farmers who moved stones to create fields for agriculture. Those old stone walls remind us that our woods in Weston are less than 150 years old, relatively new in tree time. By harvesting firewood in Weston forests, we are continuing the tradition of using this land, and we are doing it in a way that does not harm the forest, its wild inhabitants or water and soil resources.

Forestry is a multi-generational project. Lands' Sake's wood cutting strategy is to thin the working area by selectively cutting trees that have value as firewood, with an eye toward opening the canopy to allow other trees the space they need to thrive. The Land's Sake forestry team, with oversight from Brian Donahue, Associate Conservation Commission member, carefully selects the trees to be cut, leaving healthy specimens to take advantage of the reduced competition from neighboring trees. In each area, the team makes note of potentially high value timber trees: hardwood specimens growing straight and tall. These are left for possible harvest

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in the future. The economic value of these timber trees is likely to increase, as lumber and fuel become scarcer and more expensive. The firewood harvesting we do in Weston can be conducted indefinitely into the future in this manner, and the sale of the wood covers the cost of labor: it is sustainable.

Lands' Sake plans to harvest about 50 cords of firewood a year. Its cutting plan is registered with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, as required by law. Not required by law is the care with which the wood cutters cut and remove the trees. Knowing how highly Weston residents value the aesthetic appearance of their Town forests, wood cutters remove or disperse the slash (unusable branches), and cut stumps low to the ground. Two years after an area has been cut it is difficult to tell where the work was conducted. Currently, cutting is occurring in the Sears Land, off Crescent Street. In the next few years, Lands' Sake will also be harvesting firewood in Ogilvie Town Forest, north of Sudbury Road and west of Concord Road.



*Lands' Sake staff work all winter cutting, splitting, and stacking cordwood on Weston Conservation Land
– photo by Michele Grzenda*

Weston's wood harvesting practices demonstrate that our forests can simultaneously provide beautiful vistas, wildlife habitat, passive recreation, and economic value. To learn more about firewood, attend the woodsplitting workshop that Lands' Sake will conduct on February 27th, or view the video about Lands' Sake's forestry practices on the Lands' Sake website. This winter, perhaps the sight of the stacks of firewood in the Sears Land or Ogilvie Town Forest will remind you of our practical Yankee antecedents, who would be pleased to see our prudent use of nature's gifts. There's an old saw (forgive the pun) that wood warms you twice: once when you split it, and again when you burn it. In Weston, we should add a third: it warms your heart to know that the wood you are burning in your fireplace or wood stove is a sustainable product of your town's forest.

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