

How to Tame an Overgrown, High-Visibility, Woodland Plant Garden

By Cass Turnbull

Nature abhors a garden. I wish I could remember who said that. It's so true. Unless we tiptoed into the woods and built a cabin without touching the ground, what most of us have is a disturbed site. Upon it, we impose an artist's conception of nature, which is not really a natural area at all. Rather, it is planted with species that may or *may not* have occurred naturally on that site, or even occurred naturally with each other. The site will become a battleground, not self-sustaining woods, and we will eventually need to intervene.

As soon as the plants are put in ground, the forces of entropy are unleashed. Exotic invasives (laurel, holly, Himalayan blackberry) and not-so-exotic invasives (grass, dandelions, shot weed) move in to take up residence. And then one discovers that even some of the chosen ones are way more prolific—even outright aggressive—compared to others. Three, four, and five plants will begin to occupy the same space. Everything is everywhere! Furthermore, no matter who planted it—the avid amateur, the native plant biologist, or the professional designer—in five or ten years the garden reveals itself to have been overplanted. We are all driven to make it look reasonably right at the beginning, only to find that we have yet again underestimated the mature size of shrubs, or how many trees to put together, and we foolishly thought the day would never come to tell on us. **But now the day is here.**

I am frequently asked to renovate overgrown gardens, and increasingly overgrown native-plant gardens. To bring order out of chaos—and to do so in a way that the garden will still appear natural, or perhaps even a bit wild—is big fun and a real challenge. For years I have enjoyed making people's woods prettier. But before I tackle the area outside the front door, the owner must first face *The Unpleasant Truth*: Pruning, renovating, and all gardening is an unnatural act! The very principles that make a garden look better are antithetical to what might be considered the golden rule of nature—to maximize diversity. In other words, nature, especially in a disturbed area, loves a mess! Birds and bugs and critters love a half-uprooted, topped rotten tree, leaning on a shrub that is full of dead wood, with broken brown fern fronds, surrounded by prickly bushes impaling dead Big Leaf Maple leaves by the gobs. Not only that, your newts, lizards, and snakes wish you would leave a pile of rubble and dried dead weeds in the backyard.

You may even have supplied the local fauna with some of these messy areas on your large property. But most folks want something a little more pleasant at the front door. Here, I try to mimic a more established ecology. Maybe not the lovely monoculture of the climax forest, with a single sylvan grove and a carpet of oxalis—but something more along the line of a shady forest floor at the Mt. Adams campground.

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Renovating an overgrown native-plant garden means separating layers, taking out some of the brown (dead stuff), reducing the number of plants occupying the same place, and deleting other plants completely just to make a nicer looking garden. This is tough on some folks who will react according to deeply held subconscious beliefs, like:

- Plants are either all good or all bad.
- Natives are the good plants and therefore all should live.
- Natural means not interfering—I like the overgrown look.
- A good pruner could just prune it back to the right sizes and nothing would have to die.

But actually, something will. Have to die, that is.

Remove Plants

Let's start by killing the exotic woody invasives, shall we? Things like laurel, cotoneaster, holly, and blackberry. Most people can agree on that. But this is not as easy as one would hope. If you **cut them to the ground**, they just grow back, with the possible exception of an old woody scotch broom. A holly, for example, could easily outlive you, even if you cut it to the ground every other month for thirty years! Long after you've turned to dust, it will have sprung up to twenty feet and made a merry Christmas scene. **Digging a plant up** can be way, way more work than seems worthwhile, with plenty of destruction to nearby desirables, and it can turn up a host of weed seeds, too. But, then, aren't nettles just more native plants?

A **saws-all** and an eight-foot **pry bar** (which my husband calls the *tool of ignorance*, \$8 to rent, \$30 to buy) with fulcrum might work if it can be maneuvered into place. If you can spare \$200 you can get yourself a **Weed Wrench TM**. They're cool. Ecological restoration workers use a \$500 Round-Up (glyphosate) **injection gun** (JK Injections) system to apply concentrate to the freshly cut stems or to inject invasives such as Japanese knotweed. I use a \$0.99 touch up plastic paint canister with brush in lid and 9% glyphosate as a **cut-stump treatment** to any and all unwanted woody brush. (Apologies to my 100% organic friends). More information on my method is available in the **Groundcovers: Ivy removal**, section of my book, *Cass Turnbull's Guide to Pruning*.

So, let it be a lesson to you new people to patrol your garden every fall and pull these nuisances early on, when they are 1-2" tall and can be easily dispatched with a pair of pliers.

Next up, and a little harder for the native-plant novice, is removing the native invasives. Our native plants like it here. Some **really** like it here, and several are perfectly adapted to out compete anything else you have on your property. Some are underground spreaders that are harder to stop than the ones that just have babies all over the place. In either case you are wise to remove some of these overly aggressive native plants. I've seen salmonberry invade and conquer the mossy woods and open fields with amazing success! And remember that horsetail, fireweed, and crows are native. Foxglove, cattails, and red-winged blackbirds aren't. It's okay to hate a native plant on your property. You can ban it from

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your garden; but don't worry; it is living happily someplace else nearby! In regular gardening parlance, the term *vigorous* is sometimes code for *invasive*. In restoration ecology, the term *very successful* can mean *invasive*. So, listen closely to plant descriptions and choose wisely.

On the other hand, sometimes you **want** some thicket-producing natives as a mixed hedge of deciduous and evergreen shrubs (like Oregon grape, ocean spray, red-twig dogwood, hazelnut, currant, and elderberry) to protect your forest edge from the invading non-natives. Or you may want a shorter, spreading thicket along your pasture fence (with plants such as snowberry and wild roses) that is kept from spreading by haying the field every year. But these same plants can run roughshod or overwhelm your front doorstep garden. You may care to remove just some or all of those, depending on the design and whether or not they are making themselves a nuisance. Sometimes, the native garden has already become completely overwhelmed and the only course left is to just surrender and pull out the losers— deleting, say, the huckleberry and sword ferns that have been totally submerged and overcome by the salal and ocean spray. Pretend you designed it that way.

In general, no more than two plants should occupy the same place. Pick two that look good together, or that offer high-low contrast and edit out the others. A special case exists along the walkway, where the best choice is to have only low materials at the edge, with nothing too threatening or crowding at eye level.

Now that we have removed unwanted

woody plants by any means necessary, let's proceed to the next job.

De-vine and Get the Brown Out

Stringy groundcovers can muck up the good looks of a mixed planting. I often delete native vines, strawberry, and ankle busting wild blackberry or restrict them to a dedicated area of their own.

And, even more un-naturally, I am apt to hand rake (or just push down) the worst of the brown leaves and other brown stuff (dog paddle out dead fern fronds and big leaf maple leaves caught up in the shrubs and make sure the curled brown leaves under the rhododendrons are raked out of sight). Tamp down or remove dead twigs and downed branchlets that fall from your conifer in every storm. Clean the path. The finer deciduous leaves get to stay, and areas farther from view can stay completely leafed and naturally mulched. To make up for the removal of debris, I sometimes have to reapply a mulch—arborist conifer chips most closely mimic the forest floor and work to suppress weeds. If you have your own chipper you can feel good about the small recycle cycle you use to clean up and then mulch with the same, but now shredded, material.

When working my way through the landscape, I leave sword ferns in the right places and gleefully relocate the rest as I consider them to be a near perfect plant for understory in native and non-native shade gardens. Sword ferns are great to use to complete designs that have been disrupted by removing large, unwanted woody plants. I love almost all the ferns. The maidenhair and deer ferns are especially choice and fabulous to find in a garden. But, as anybody who has

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worked with me can tell you, I make war on lady ferns (*Athyrium*). In my view, they have too many babies that show up inside desirable shrubs, then die back and leave the shrubs stuffed with ugly dead, broken brown fern fronds in the winter. I hate them. I use a baby mattock to murder each and every one I can find, with a zeal that scares even me.

Pruning

I've noticed that there is just no guilt-free living anymore. When I was a kid, I ran the sink water as I brushed my teeth; we burnt piles of autumn leaves, and turned over rocks on the beach to molest the marine life. And until recently, I used to say that **deadwooding** was always good and you couldn't go wrong—that is until a lady told me she kept the dead twigs on her lilac that were the perfect size for some particular bird to build its nest. Drat! It's true! Deadwood of all sorts is good for nature. Unfortunately, deadwood looks good pruned out of our trees and tree-like shrubs. Actually, it looks really good pruned out of everything. So, carry on with the deadwooding, with the knowledge that there may be some places you will choose to leave it. Then properly dispose of your gardener's guilt by composting it with all the other aforementioned dead twigs, leaves and plants.

I have written extensively about how to prune plants according to one of three basic plant habits (cane-grower, tree-like, and mounding habit) and we have posted a valuable native plant list on the website with plant size, relative aggressiveness, and pruning habit of each as well as the notations BBC (banned by Cass) and CPF

(Cass's personal favorite). Pruning plants for size control is largely unsuccessful for all but the briefest time. Pruning to **referee** between plants or to make individual plants look **more attractive** are the real goals of pruning in landscape renovation.

I can think of three common scenarios. One is when two plants of equal size are too crowded. Prune some of the branches of each that are headed into the other, as well as general thinning throughout. Now the shrubs mingle, like two slow dancers, not barroom brawlers.

A second situation arises when two different-sized plants are too crowded. In this instance, prune off the lowest limbs of the tallest plant to accommodate the understory. For example, remove the lowest limbs of the vine maple that grows through the low mahonia under it.

Thirdly, pruning can do wonders for trees or tree-like shrubs, especially near a building, like for instance a vine maple next to the house. First take out the deadwood. Then prune off the branches that touch the building, if to do so does not exceed the pruning budget. The *pruning budget* is the combination of the branch diameter and amount of foliage that can be removed without causing watersprouts or rot or dieback in any given plant. For trees the limit is about 1/8 to 1/16 of the total foliage in a given pruning cycle (every five-to-ten years). The size of the thinning cut for an understory tree should not exceed about 1", most often much less. Use other PlantAmnesty pruning guidelines just to make it all look better: thin out crossing/rubbing, broken, diseased, wrong way branches (though never exceeding the pruning budget described

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above).

A Touch of Charm

By now you should be feeling pretty good about your native garden. I'm always amazed at just how much material can be removed from a garden with no one able to tell that it's been touched. The garden still looks natural and even lush, but now nicer to view, with greater depth and detail.

However, before you leave well enough alone, I'd like to put t a plug in for the very lowest level of greenery. Now that several of the giant shrubs are gone, you have room to put in low groundcovers, self-seeding annuals, and choice perennials that can give the native plant garden that *ooo, ahh* quality. So, when you can, leave some empty spaces on the forest floor, especially near the door and the walkways.

You can then add a carpet of successful (wink, wink) groundcovers like oxalis, or vancouveria and bleeding heart, or bead ruby (false lily-of-the valley). You could salt the wood's edges with robust, self-seeding annuals like piggy back plants, lupine, or columbine. For a more delicate area of well-matched, not-too-vigorous small guys, use deer ferns, foam flowers, and vanilla leaf. And for the ultimate in woodland perfection, include a few trilliums, fawn lilies, and, God willing, a living patch of bunchberry!

Intervention FINE! You can rest and be proud of your reasonable facsimile of the beautiful and wonderful, wild woods. And for those of you who can't stand this sort of strong-handed intervention in your beloved native plant garden, you're in luck. It's your garden and you can do whatever you want with it, or nothing at all, because in the end it needs only please you.

Low and unthreatening plants near walkway.

