

Carol Kaynor

Defensible Space

January sun lights the tops of the spruce in my backyard. It is 30 below and clear. The sun, appreciably higher than in late December, graces the straggly pipe-cleaner trees as much as the taller, fuller spruce, making them all look rich and green. From the window of my study upstairs, I look out over acres of forest lit by low winter sun, rolling gently upward toward the ridge that forms the north border of Goldstream Valley. The land appears uninhabited, but nestled in the forest and perched on the slope of the ridge all along this part of the valley are countless other dwellings, from shacks to cabins to fancy houses, owned in large part by people who like their privacy and the buffer of trees.

It is the winter after wildland fires burned 6.59 million acres in Alaska, some of those big fires very close to where I live. As a result, though we've paused for the winter season, my husband and I are in the process of removing trees around our house to make what is called a defensible space. The State of Alaska offers grants to homeowners in areas like ours—what they call the “wildland/urban interface”—to clear around our houses so that firefighters may have some hope of saving our home in a wildfire. We live about eight miles outside Fairbanks in a black spruce thicket, which I am learning is probably the most dangerous environment for fire the North can offer. The resin of this species is highly flammable. The trees keep their dead lower branches for years, and they tend to grow close together over moss and lichen that can carry a ground fire. The flames ignite the dead, dry lower boughs, which carry the fire into the crowns. What seems like poor design is actually an asset: black spruce can use fire to propagate. Older trees usually have large numbers of cones congregated near the top of the tree, where they are less likely to burn. Those seeds are released after a fire, which leads to the rapid growth of seedlings. The forester assigned to our defensible-space project tells me, “Black spruce are made for fire.”

Black spruce burns hot and fast, and crown fires are common. A fire's wind and heat can throw little burning bits across creeks and fire lines, quickly igniting new fires that also run up into the crowns. As the record Alaska fires in 2004 proved, these are not well-behaved, easily subdued fires. Left in its natural state, the forest of abundant black spruce that surrounds us would virtually guarantee the loss of our house if such a fire ever came near.

My house is a simple frame construction finished with inexpensive, painted wood siding and a bright blue metal roof. Although I didn't choose metal for that reason at the time, the roof gets us extra points for defensibility. Though neither large nor fancy, this is the first house I've ever owned all by myself. I had lived in Alaska for nearly twenty years before I felt I could truly call someplace my own. The property is a small-time dog musher's dream: twenty acres that border several miles of trails along the protected greenbelt of Goldstream Creek. A friend and I cleared the house site by hand, using brush axes and chain saws to cut what seemed like a million trees. For several years after, brown scars laced my arms from the prickly grasp of spruce branches. The design of the house and the layout of the yard are mine. The roots of my house, which sits on posts atop cement footers on a gravel pad, are more shallow even than the shallow roots of black spruce. My attachment to this place runs as deep as the permafrost beneath it.

So the scruffy pipe cleaners, along with some of the less healthy big trees, are coming down. Our forester has estimated 254 trees in all need to be taken out; that number would seem incomprehensibly high except that 252 of them are less than six inches in diameter. Clearing them is an endless, back-breaking rhythm of sawing and dragging away, sawing and dragging away, all the while tripping over ubiquitous ankle-biters, the twisty little sapling spruces that grow all cattywampus. It takes a great deal of effort to clean out even a small patch of their disarray. At least we will not just burn all this felled wood: we are making huge brush piles that we will later run through a big chipper, creating good ground cover for the dog yard and excellent material for our dog trails.

The clearing takes hours and hours over days and weeks. We come into the house layered in a fine dust, tiny chips of wood in our hair, twigs down our shirts, scratches all over our arms. It is hot, messy work, and it is easy to become mindless, to simply trudge along. One day, bringing load after load to a brush pile, we suddenly noticed a lot of activity in the path behind us. We had been dragging trees over a yellow jacket nest. By some act of grace, neither of us was stung; somehow, the wasps had not

gathered into their angry swarm until we were out of range. We stood for a long time and watched them, grateful and sobered.

After a long summer's work, we have already cleared a thirty-foot perimeter around the house, and we're thinning out from there to a seventy-foot perimeter, inside which—once we're done—the trees will all be at least ten feet apart with no neighboring branches in contact with one another, all the underbrush cleared, and all the lower branches pruned up to ten feet above the ground.

In other words, "park-like." The dark, twisted forest will be pushed back. The thick, moist mat of lichen and moss will thin and dry out. The sun will no longer be broken into tiny slivers of light that dapple the understory. The arctic hares will find different haunts as we take away their cover. We are transforming wild thicket into a manicured grove.

I can't do this lightly, not loving trees and the wild the way I do. I admit my regret is balanced somewhat by the New Englander in me, which loves tidiness and order and especially stone walls. A part of me admires groomed forests, finds comfort in well-kept pastures framed by lines of gray stone. I sometimes lust after lawnmowers. Oh, to have a modest little lawn, just big enough for games of badminton, with a stone wall around it. Though I have now lived well over half my life in Alaska, my New England roots go back more than 360 years. I think the urge to clear land and build walls is genetic, for I would build a stone wall here on my land if I could figure out how to do it with local stones. (My father built all of his stone walls out of rocks he found on our land in Massachusetts; it wouldn't count if I imported rocks for my own wall-building impulses.) Clearing out dead wood and trimming trunks and opening up feels good to me. But so does looking at the world as it is, unmodified.

Clearing spruce is also not without its problems. In a spruce thicket, the trees support one another. Take out too many, and the remaining trees often lean and eventually fall. You can end up with an area of far fewer trees than you intended, or even no trees at all. Willows, always opportunistic, may jump into the gap, attracting hungry moose. Moose and sled dogs don't mix well. To complicate matters, what often grows on the rough ground of the opened-up spaces is grass—and not the kind you can play badminton on. A well-maintained lawn is not much of a fire hazard, but we're talking tall clumps of wild grass you could lose a small pony in. Mowing it is impossible—the ground is full of bumps, dips, and several hundred spruce stumps. Grass whips work after a fashion, but even with a gas-powered model, the task is arduous and daunting. Yet

if you leave the grass to grow tall and full, it eventually dries out to a beautiful wheat color and burns a million times faster than a crown fire.

This altering of my environment is not simple. I would love for it to be simple, to be, if one can forgive the pun, clear cut. I would love to justify my actions by thinking that in thinning the forest, I am making it more healthy. But by black spruce standards, my clearing jeopardizes the forest health far more than it benefits it. I would love to think that once I clear my defensible space, I am done, but then there is that pesky grass. One possible solution is gravel, which doesn't burn very well and has the added benefit of being inhospitable to mosquitoes. Aesthetically, however, I have some serious problems with the concept of a gravel lawn. Another possible solution is hundreds of dollars' worth of bulldozer work to clear out the stumps, and then many more dollars' worth of topsoil to fill in the pockets and hollows. But I'd rather have my little yard of sled dogs, and I can't afford both.

Lawns, too, are complicated. When I see big, well-kept lawns here in Fairbanks, I confess the word "ostentatious" occasionally comes to mind. If I sink lots of money into a lawn, what am I saying about myself, about my attitude toward my surroundings, about my values? And yet, when I trim the grass around the three young birch trees that I have lovingly encouraged to shade my dog yard, I love the tidy look, the orderliness. I have begun the tiniest of stone walls—a fairy ring—around the foot of those birches. Perhaps just a little bit of a lawn wouldn't be such a terrible thing.

For now, I will deal somehow with the wild grass and be as careful as possible with the trees. It was my choice to live here in this beautiful little swamp, with its 200-foot-deep permafrost and its millions of tiny ponds and its owls and moose and dog-mushing trails, and yes, the twisty pipe cleaner spruce. I choose now to try to protect my house from fire. Love and caution are tangled like a thicket of black spruce, and sometimes just as difficult to negotiate. But I can hope that at the edges of my forest, being safe and being wild will find ways to live with each other.