



MULCHING OPENINGS for Wildlife

BY JOE CANNELLA

If you like powerful machines and are impressed by watching something solid destroyed in seconds, you are going to like forestry mulching. If you are familiar with brush-cutters pulled behind tractors, ATVs, or on the front of a Skid Steer, you will know these can take saplings down and chop them up a bit. They will, however, leave numerous spears all over the ground, which, if you are planning to replant, those, along with the big and little stumps, will be a hinderance.

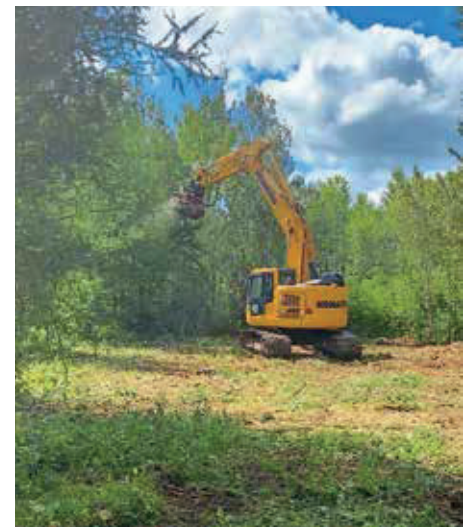
Mulching, however, is a brush-cutter on steroids. All that will be left of a full-size mature tree or brush is chips, which are suitable for landscaping in a matter of seconds. An added benefit is the chips will decompose quicker than cut brush, adding valuable compost to the soil.

I first discovered forest mulchers via YouTube videos posted to excite destruction voyeurs like me who like to see things get blown up. I know, a bit weird, but come on, I am not alone. So, do a search on YouTube for forestry mulchers. You will be impressed.

Now, aside for reliving my childhood fascination with heavy equipment, my more practical purpose was to create and reestablish forest openings on my property for wildlife management. In heavily forested country, these openings are extremely valuable for wildlife, in particular, the kind of critters that most MDHA members want around.

My land had a homestead on it nearly 80 years ago that has long since grown over into willow and spruce. However, through both historic aerial imagery and ground inspection my forester and I could identify the original opening. I wanted to bring it back...

Since I have a Woodland Stewardship plan for my property, the first step was asking my area forester if there was cost share money available for the project. The answer was yes and she came out and wrote up a plan that would provide me with some funding to offset my expenses.



First of all, if you do not have a woodland stewardship plan for your property, I highly encourage you seriously consider it. Similar to farmers who receive expertise and funds for conservation projects to benefit wildlife on agriculture lands, these same programs are available to forest land owners.

I wanted an opening for wildlife because there are multiple reasons openings are valuable. First and foremost, it is all about the sunlight exposure. When sunlight hits the ground, many plants or perhaps more accurately, seeds, finally are allowed to grow. Being freed from the entrapment of shade allows new diversity to explode. Sometimes, in fact, the seed bank has held seed for years just waiting for a disturbance like a fire, or in this case, a machine, to provide the opportunity to grow. Many of these plants are preferred by deer, grouse, turkeys, bears, and varying other species, including the current importance of pollinator habitat.



Vast timber can be monotonous and many creatures, like deer and grouse, prefer the edges of different habitats. Making openings creates these edges, which also tend to have the most abundant food since they capture more sunlight. Picture soft mass trees on edge vs the spindly individuals in the shade of the woods. The ones in the sunlight will be larger with more branches bearing significantly more fruit. More sunlight equates to more plant diversity, too. More plant diversity benefits more species of wildlife.

What grows in the opening itself, of course, is most important. You have a choice, let nature take its course and just see what grows or every few years mow the opening to maintain the current state, which alone will be outstanding. Or, you can manipulate via management using herbicides to control grasses versus broadleaf plants preferred by deer. You can also plant the opening to the ever-popular clovers or other food plot favorites.



Depending on the size of the opening, all of the above is possible.

A critical piece of this project, though, is securing the equipment. I found that through searching Facebook Market Place and Craigslist there are numerous small businesses offering rental of equipment or full service. Renting sounds great and is the best deal, but, depending on access to the required trailers and distance you need to travel, it may not be your best choice. I also believe seeking local businesses is yet another way deer hunters and their camps can help support local rural economies.

I found that working with someone in my local area was best for me. Cliff Shermer and his daughter Lin were within ten miles of my property. As an added service they owned both a Skid Steer model and a much more impressive Komatsu Excavator with a mulching head—super cool! Since my



openings consisted of large trees I wanted gone were much too big for a skid steer, my decision was easy. Watching Lin run the machine and transform my land into exactly what I envisioned was very satisfying. That inner child was definitely having fun. I just wished she would have let me run it, though it was best I didn't ask. Pricing is done by the hour and there will be a fee for equipment traveling and unloading at your site. Hence, the closer the better. I will leave contact information for the Shermers at the end of this article if you are anywhere near the three counties area where Itasca, St. Louis, and Koochiching meet. I highly recommend them.

I would like to think the original homesteaders are looking down and smiling at how their pastures and forest openings have not only returned, but are also probably quite impressed at how today's machines could do in hours what probably took them months. 🐾

Author's Note: Cliff Shermer can be reached at 218-742-7592. Cliff is a retired logger who ran a very successful logging business before he retired. But, old loggers can't sit still for too long, so he started a forest mulching business with his daughter Lin who finds time to help her dad and is an accomplished heavy equipment operator and is in high demand for punching roads through the woods for logging operations in northern Minnesota.