

Fire for survival

Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

I felt motivated to write about fire building again because of a search and rescue mission for a lost hunter that we took part in a few weeks ago. Like so many of these missions, the ending was not a happy one as the poor hunter crossed his last horizon. Once again, the rough outcome of this incident could have been prevented. The hunter left his survival pack at the vehicle, along with extra warm clothes. His path was going to be just off a 4WD road, about a mile in, then straight back out again to his vehicle parked next to the road. What could go wrong? Plenty. He got somewhat confused and began walking the wrong direction. As temperatures fell throughout the late afternoon and early evening, things got worse. He was beginning to suffer the effects of hypothermia. One of the biggest threats an outdoor enthusiast can face is hypothermia. Back in the day we used to call it “exposure.” According to the Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention, an average of 1,301 people die annually from hypothermia. It has become so serious that most states include instruction on its treatment and prevention in their hunter education courses. Such things as wind and moisture can accelerate hypothermia. Wind can penetrate the clothing and push heat away from the body. Wind also causes evaporation on exposed skin, amplifying the cold. Being wet, from perspiration or weather conditions, can accelerate hypothermia at an alarming rate. The body’s normal temperature is 98.6 degrees. The medical condition known as hypothermia occurs when the body’s core temperature drops below 95 degrees. When the temperature reaches 92 degrees and below, it is considered immediately life threatening. Prolonged exposure to cold will eventually use up your body’s stored energy, lowering your body temperature. Body temperature that is too low affects the brain, making the victim unable to think clearly or move well. It can cause drowsiness and very low energy levels, resulting in memory loss, an altered

state of no longer being able to care for oneself, and really bad decisions. Like the decision to keep on walking in the wrong direction. Wrong direction is exactly what our lost hunter did. He wandered off into some of the steepest and roughest country around, opposite of the direction from his vehicle. In spite of a massive search effort involving dozens of volunteers from several SAR teams, the man was not found in time. He was found deceased in an area so remote that recovery had to be done by helicopter. Bottom line of all of this is to be prepared. No matter how short your trip is, or how close you plan on staying near the vehicle, take some gear with you. If our hunter would have just sat down and built a fire for warmth, SAR would have found him the first evening and he would have been fine. You don’t have to always carry the storage wagon full of supplies, but one thing for certain is something to make a survival fire with, an extra jacket and a few snacks. A fire can serve many useful purposes to a person found in a survival situation. Aside from the obvious,

which is warmth, a fire can cook food, act as a signal to any searchers, purify water, provide a base camp and generally give a person a feeling of comfort and security. I build a fire in my woodstove just about every evening during the winter months. It creates a sense of security but it is much different than having to build a fire in the woods. At home, I have a nice supply of cut, split, and seasoned wood. I light up one of those fire starters and adjust the damper, and all is right with the world. Such is not the case in the great outdoors. You will not find a supply of split and dried firewood. Add a pouring rain or falling snow and suddenly, you better make sure the disaster insurance is paid up, because you have a problem. Most people think that a cigarette lighter in the pocket is all that is needed however, such may not be the case. Butane lighters do not work well in extreme cold, when you need the fire most, but I carry a few anyway. I usually carry several options in my pack in case something fails, and a couple more in my pockets. The stormproof/wind-

proof matches in a waterproof container are terrific, and there is an electric lighter now that you simply charge up and it will light dry tinder or shavings quite well. I hate the rechargeable thing because I always forget to charge it, but if you can remember, it is a great back up. There is a product called a metal match, (a magnesium fire starter) where you scrape off some of the combustible material from one side and strike the other side with a knife to make sparks. This in turn ignites the material and starts the fire. It is also possible to start a fire with a battery and some steel wool. My favorite method, especially during wet conditions, is a small flare. You can purchase these in a small size, around 5 inches long, and they fit nicely in a pack. A flare will usually burn for quite a few minutes at a very high temperature and is a very effective fire-starting tool. I realize they are bulky but worth their weight in gold during an emergency.

There are of course the more primitive methods such as a bow or rubbing two sticks together, but I have found all I get with that is good cardio exercise and no flames. It may work on television but for me, I carry matches and lighters. Throw in a few different fire starters, like Wet-Fire, and similar products. If you are going to seek tinder and fuel on site, avoid wood lying on the ground. This wood will have absorbed moisture from the ground and make it near impossible to ignite. Pulling dead branches off trees is a much better choice and finding a beetle killed spruce still standing is the jackpot. Try breaking a piece of wood from the tree and see if it makes a nice snapping sound, indicating dry wood. With a knife, whittling off the wet outer areas and exposing the dry inner fuel can make a fuzz stick. Grass, milkweed, dry sage, inner bark from a dead aspen, old bird nests, all make good tinder.

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Have yourself a natural little Christmas

Gardening from A to Z

By Linda Corwine McIntosh

Oh sure, you could go to one of the big box stores and buy some incredible sparkly or silk holiday decorations, but wouldn't it be fun to use some natural materials growing in the area? Or better yet, how about incorporating plants that are growing right in your own landscape?

If you're like most of us, when you're shopping for plants in the spring and summer months you probably don't think about planting plants that can be used during the holidays. So I think this is a perfect time to make a Santa wish list that you could take to the garden center with you when spring arrives.

Holly is always a popular choice to bring cheer to the Christmas season. I know holly can be somewhat difficult to grow in our area because they don't like hot, dry, sunny locations and they prefer moist acidic, well-drained soil. True, this doesn't exactly describe our soils, but amending the soil and growing them in a shady location might be worth a try. Oh, and if you want those incredible holly berries, many species require pollinator plants.

For example, Blue magic comes with two varieties planted in the same pot so pollination is no problem. Blue Boy, Blue Girl, Blue Prince, and Blue Princess need one male to three female plants to produce berries, so know just what you're buying.

Do you know that we actually have native holly growing in the area? I usually find our native Oregon Grape, Mahonia repens, growing near the base of Gambel oak (scrub oak) and pinyons. This low growing plant is pretty hardy and obviously they don't require a lot of water. The yellow spring flowers will turn into small dark blue berries. However, I'm not recommending digging the natives.

If holly doesn't sound like something you want to deal with, Fremont Mahonia, Mahonia aquifolium, may be a perfect substitute. I think the leaves look so similar to those of holly that most people will probably think it is holly.

This "desert holly" has year-round landscape interest with its fragrant yellow spring flowers turning into large bright red summer fruits. The plant will attract bees and birds and they're even deer resistant. In the fall and winter months they will turn a pretty purple-red color.

A couple other really great attributes is Fremont likes sunny locations and is drought tolerant. It's a slow grower but can reach 6-10 feet tall and 6-8 feet wide, so it needs room to grow.

The bright red twigs from red twig dogwoods can be cut and used for all kinds of festive decorations. Just be sure to leave some red color remaining on your shrub for winter interest and foliage next summer. The ugly, older dark-colored canes can be cut to ground level at any time of year to keep your plant rejuvenated. Dogwoods are not drought tolerant so keep that in mind if you're putting it on your wishlist.

Cotoneasters are really easy to grow and the bright red berries are always striking. There are a lot of choices when it comes to these shrubs. There are low growing varieties and some that can be used to cascade from a rock in a rock garden. Others can be grown as a specimen shrub or hedge. Some will hold their winter color much better than others.

I don't think you can go wrong with a showy mountain ash. This small tree only gets about 20 feet tall and has outstanding clusters of red berries during the summer months that should remain red throughout the Christmas season. The white flowers in the spring and pretty red and orange fall color make this an outstanding landscape tree. I know we're all freaked out about ash being attacked by emerald ash borer, but this isn't a "true ash" and will not get these borers. In fact, it has very few insect problems.

Along those lines, winter king hawthorn is a gorgeous tree. It does have thorns but I wouldn't let that deter me from planting one. They will grow to 20 to 30 feet tall.

The white flowers appear in mid-May and will develop into outstanding red fruits that ripen in September. The fruit will look great well into Christmas. The fall color can range from purple to deep red and with its multi-colored, flaky bark it can be a great focal tree in the landscape.

Crabapple trees may come to mind when you think of red winter fruit. Sugar tyme is a good choice being resistant to several disease problems that crabapples often get. Red Baron and red jewel also have red fruit that may persist through the holiday season.

If you're looking for some great dried flowers for a Christmas arrangement, hydrangeas may be just what you're looking for.

Once they've dried, they could fit into almost any holiday arrangement with their natural tan appearance. However, you could spray paint them for a pop of color that may be needed. You could even sprinkle a little glitter on them if that fits your style.

There are a handful of these shrubs that will do well here. However, the summer flower color will usually not be blue because the alkali in the soil changes the color. The flowers are so pretty that this doesn't deter most people. All parts of hydrangea plants are toxic to people and pets so be aware of this if it's an issue.

Of course, who could resist taking a few indiscriminate cuttings from a conifer for use at Christmas? Even the blue berries on juniper boughs can shine during the holidays. Cones and rose hips could even be incorporated into a festive arrangement. Barberry and boxwood shrubs are also worth considering.

I just have to say, if you're debating a freshly cut tree versus an artificial one, obtaining a permit and cutting a tree in the forest will help thin the forest which helps the forest health as well as contributing to fire mitigation. And it can even be fun! I just love the fragrance of a fresh-cut tree! No artificial air freshener can quite replicate that.

Research shows, producing and transporting one fake tree has a carbon footprint of about 88 pounds which is about 10 times the carbon footprint of a live Christmas tree. And of course they have to be shipped from China and then to your local store. Once it's made its way to the landfill, an artificial Christmas tree is estimated to take about 500 years to decompose because most are made with PVC or PE.

On the other hand, a cut tree that was turned into mulch can break down in about six months. Christmas tree farmers plant one to three seedlings for every tree that is cut so they are helping to clean the air year round. Just remember, a fresh cut tree needs a lot of water so check it every day or so to make sure it's not out of water.

I heard a story of a man who buys a living Christmas tree every year and plants it after the holidays. He's done this for several years and now he has several conifers of various sizes in his landscape. How great is that? Just don't keep the live tree in your house for more than three days or it will break dormancy and you'll have to keep it in the garage near a window and won't be able to plant it until spring.

One of our local garden centers cuts the lower branches from their fresh cut trees so the tree will fit into a stand. These branches are then used by volunteers for making wreaths for veterans graves and other charitable causes. I think that's fantastic!

So why not let your natural Christmas creativity shine this holiday season? And just think, there will be fewer boxes to pack away.

Linda Corwine McIntosh is an ISA-certified arborist, commercial pesticide applicator and advanced master gardener.

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Once the tinder is burning well, we will need some kindling. These are dry sticks smaller than a pencil to fuel the tinder with. From there we progress to squaw wood, which is up to a half inch in diameter.

Finally, you can begin adding the last wood that is called fuel wood. This is the good heavy stuff that will burn longer and provide a nice bed of hot coals. A good idea is to have pieces of fuel wood drying around your fire, so you have a source of dry fuel at the ready. For an overnight fire, collect about three times the wood you think you are going to need. You will be surprised how fast your supply dwindles down and you don't want to have to look for more in the dark.

I won't preach to you about how to build a fire but will suggest that you practice. Next camping trip, pretend you are in a survival situation and see how you make out. There was a time when I could not build a fire unless I used up a quart of lighter fluid and a half box of matches, but I have gotten better. I think fire is the most important survival tool, and you should master it.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a director and public information officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org