

Here's the best way to split gnarly firewood

By Jim Deaton

Perfection in splitting troublesome firewood is not accomplished with a splitting maul and wedge or with a gasoline-powered mechanical wood-splitter, but with a chain saw.

Some of us have spent hours and sometimes days splitting troublesome rounds of firewood with countless swings of a maul to hit a wedge that either jumps from the wood and tries to hide from us on the ground, or gets so buried in a crack that it takes us several minutes to remove (and sometimes several oaths). Others have spent the money to buy a gasoline-powered mechanical wood-splitter or borrowed their neighbor's and had to pay for something that "never broke before." A chain saw can do the job not only cheaper and faster but better. Better because you have uniform slabs of wood to build the ends of your firewood stacks.

The first step is to lay rounds of wood side by side (Fig. 1), with the long sides touching, on a level wooden surface (which protects the chain from cutting into the ground or other



Figure 2. Making little slabs out of big rounds. If a round needs more than one cut, make the side cuts first.

unfriendly material). Any wooden surface will work, either boards, waferwood, or plywood. If the wooden surface is elevated, so much the better. I started by laying plywood on the ground and rounds on top of that, but later elevated my plywood platform to reduce stooping. A wooden platform on top of a pair of sawhorses will eliminate stooping.

The next step is to place something heavy—like other rounds of wood placed crosswise at both ends of the row of rounds, like bookends—not only to keep the end rounds from rolling off the platform, but to keep enough pressure in the row so rounds do not roll or turn during the cutting.

Using this method, you're not really *splitting* the wood: you're *ripping* it. Ripping wood—that is, cutting *with* the grain in the horizontal position—is faster than cutting *across* the grain. In addition to being faster, it creates a useful by-product: shavings that can be used to mulch around bushes, to construct a meandering trail through a rose garden, or to attractively line a rose garden.

Before you start ripping with your chain saw, your main caution is to **make sure the bottom tooth of the bark-dog is stabbed into the end of the round before the moving chain touches the side of the round** (Fig. 3). If you don't do this, small, light rounds can be pulled rapidly into the end of your saw; while large, immovable rounds can cause your saw to be pulled quite rapidly into the end of the round. This is not particularly dangerous, but it can be alarming if you are not prepared for it to happen.

If a round of wood only requires a cut down the center—through the heartwood—to have two manageable pieces, no problem. But if a round of wood is fair size, as in Figure 2, and will require several cuts to make slabs of wood from two to four inches thick, it is best to make cuts on both sides of



Figure 1. Lay the rounds side-by-side on a wooden cutting surface, with heavy blocks on the ends.

the round first. Otherwise, one side will be lopsided, and lopsided things tend to turn, always when you don't want them to.

After the cuts are made and the slabs are looking like freshly-cut pieces of thick bread, the slabs can be laid flat on your platform to be cut into smaller pieces that will resemble rough-cut boards. Usually, additional splitting is not needed, because slabs will fit in most stoves. Besides, wide slabs work well for building vertical ends on your wood pile. Wide slabs can be split later with a splitting maul. A wedge is not needed, because a chop with a splitting maul or heavy axe in the heart of a two- to four-inch thick slab, or along the annual growth rings, will split it without too much effort, to reduce it to a chunk of wood just right for your stove. Δ



Figure 3. Make sure the saw's bark-dog is touching the round before the moving chain touches the wood.