

Tell “High Grading” to High Tail it Right Out of Your Woods!

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If I had a dollar for every phone call I’ve had in the last 7 years about walnut harvesting, I would have quite a bit of spending money! Most people know that many of our native hardwood trees are exceptionally valuable, especially the black walnut tree. It should be no surprise that I get numerous calls every year regarding the marketing of black walnut. Conveniently, most of the timber buyers in Iowa specifically want this same tree species.

Selling timber is not as simple as marking trees and selling them on a handshake. Selling timber is also not as simple as harvesting your largest, healthiest, most valuable trees and leaving the residual forest to sort things out – that would be called high grading. High grading is an old forestry and mining term that means “harvesting the best and leaving the rest.” I practice high grading all the time - I high grade out the cherry and strawberry Starbursts, and leave the orange and lemon candies for some other poor sap! Unfortunately, this happens all too often with the high value trees in our Western Iowa forests.

So what is wrong with high grading? Well, I can easily relate it to raising cattle. I don’t know many cattlemen that would send their best cows to the market. The cows that have been selected to stay in the herd are there because they are good mothers and/or because they have genetics that are favorable for future cattle production. The cattle that do not display the best genetics or temperament probably end up at the sale barn. That doesn’t mean that the best cattle never go to market – they may be sold after they have dispersed their genetics, and are getting close to their useable lifespan. Our forests should be managed in much the same way.

If you take out the most valuable trees (walnut, oak, etc.), and do nothing with the residual trees before or after harvest, several things can happen. One, you may severely damage the residual trees in the logging process. Two, you lose the best genetics out of your timber stand – which generally leaves the unhealthy or defected “hamburger” trees. Three, and most importantly, you can change the species composition of your forest simply by removing oak or walnut. Most of our high value hardwood trees do not regenerate under the shade of other trees. What is left after high grading is a less commercially valuable stand of hackberry, elm, ash, or in the worst case scenario – invasive plants. If you are a sportsman or wildlife enthusiast, removing nut bearing trees (mast-producing trees) without follow-up work, will degrade the habitat value of your woodland.

It doesn’t have to be this way though. The purpose of Forestry is to make sure that our forests stay productive and healthy through timber sales and through all the other uses of the resource. If you have questions about forest management, give me a call at 712.482.6245 or e-mail me at Lindsey.barney@dnr.iowa.gov.