

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Stumped about stumps?**

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A lot of what we are taught about gardening, or what we have learned by watching others, actually results in needless work. Sometimes this extra work is actually counter productive. A case in point is the effort and expense that many homeowners will undergo in order to remove the stump after having a tree cut down. Professional stump removal can cost between \$80-\$400. Doing it yourself can involve lots of hard hand labor or renting a stump grinder for several hours.

So why do we remove stumps? In ultra-urban environments, where the tree boxes along streets are quite small, you may have to remove the stump in order to have space to replant. Or, let us say that you have cut down a tree in order to build a patio in your backyard. You might need to remove the stump in order to have a level surface to build on. But in most cases, the stump can stay and actually be a resource for your garden.

Often people say they are removing the stump to keep it from re-sprouting. To my mind, this only makes sense if the original tree was undesirable (such as an invasive) or it was badly placed (say a large canopy tree planted right against the house.) Otherwise, re-sprouting is great!

Re-sprouting is an efficient and natural means of reproduction. Indeed, more trees in the forest grow from stumps than grow from seeds. When we lost a number of trees to hurricane Floyd, I selected the sprouts I wanted to let grow, and cut off the rest. Within three years we had good size saplings, and within five years we had trees tall enough to provide shade.

These trees grew more quickly than store-bought trees because they had the benefit of nutrients, fungi, and water from the mother tree. In many ways, fungi is the lifeblood of the forest.. Thus I wound up with bigger replacement trees (and more of them) than I could have afforded if I had relied upon the nursery.

So why do people think re-sprouting is a bad way to grow trees? This is a hold-over from commercial forestry. Commercial tree plantations are designed to grow trees as a crop suited to mechanical harvesting. They want their trees as uniform as possible in age and size for efficient clear-cutting. So unless you are planning to log your property commercially, re-sprouted trees are just fine.

But what about the stump itself? Isn't it an ugly eyesore? Well, beauty is always in the eye of the beholder, but personally I love my stump garden. As my stumps were re-sprouting, I planted ferns and other woodland plants in and around them, as well as some shrubs. The result was a woodland in miniature that never fails to make me smile. Apparently I am not the only one who likes this look, because you can actually buy decorative fake stumps (complete with fake plants and fake bears or raccoons).

Another option is to use the stump as a pedestal for a bird bath or planter. But that is not all. In 1999, Artist Madelon Galland launched the STUMP project to decorate tree stumps on New York City sidewalks as a way to "honor that which had been diminished, and bring it back into relationship with the neighborhood." She upholstered the stumps as unauthorized public art, and now there are lots of websites with instructions for making your own upholstered stumps. In other words, you are

limited only by your own creativity. How about stump fountains? Stump sculptures? Stump landscape lights?

Eventually, of course, your stump will decay, enriching the soil of your garden. Decaying wood does more than return nutrients to the soil, however. Spongy, rotten wood can absorb and hold an amazing amount of water. This is why you can see lines of young trees in the forest. They have grown in and around a decaying log. Because of the water held in that log, they got a head start and were able to outpace other young trees on the forest floor.

So next time you have to remove a tree, consider saving the stump.

*The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to [montgomerycivic@yahoo.com](mailto:montgomerycivic@yahoo.com)*