

# The Pleasures and Perils of Felling a Large Tree Limb

by [Jeff Plude](#) (January 2021)



*Path in the Forest*, Erich Heckel



**A fierce storm earlier in** the fall knocked out our utilities for a day and a half. As we drove around later my wife and I saw trees here and there that had been flattened, uprooted like they were weeds in a garden. To see something so tall and primal and firmly embedded in the ground just plucked up by a powerful invisible arm, with its snarl of roots and a boulder of clinging dirt now exposed, or its trunk snapped off or bent over, is vaguely unsettling.

Trees are majestic, but they are also themselves brute forces of nature.

I remember a guy I had chatted with briefly at a summer gathering a decade ago who had a hearty laugh, but a year or so later he was driving to work in his SUV on a road enclosed by towering pines and one of them, out of nowhere, crashed onto the roof of his car and killed him instantly. I've seen redwoods up close, colossuses of the plant kingdom that hardly seemed real.

We just bought the townhome we've been renting for the past few years, so with all this in mind I decided that maybe I'd try to take down the large tree limb that hung close to my office window upstairs. Or rather I thought that I'd *hire* someone to take it down. But I've gotten to be quite the handyman in my later middle age, so I wanted to investigate if this was something I could do myself without bringing on the catastrophe I was trying to prevent.

It would also save us a couple of hundred bucks or more. But money has little to do with it.

In his memoir *A Good Life* Ben Bradlee, the famed Washington Post editor, talks about how after he retired he liked felling trees on his property with the help of his mentally disabled teenage son (just as he himself had done with his own father). Such work is not for everyone, but for

me there is something satisfying about it. I also think of my [forefather](#) who, among the men who came over on the *Mayflower*, according to Nathaniel Philbrick's book of the same name, chopped down and hewed enough trees in the bluster and snow of their first New England winter to build a meeting house and a handful of rudimentary log houses. All with axes, handsaws, and a hardy dose of manpower. So maybe it's just in my sap.

I also spent a summer in high school swinging an ax to split logs that came from a large sawn up tree my father had had dumped into our backyard for our firepit; at the same age he'd chopped firewood daily during the Depression for his father's business selling it. I'd recently seen *Rocky* and thought it would be a novel way to keep in shape for the upcoming wrestling season, akin to Rocky using a side of beef as a heavy bag.

Mixed amid a birch here and there and other trees like itself, the threatening tree at our house is a box elder, as far as we can tell. A box elder, we learned, is sort of a bastard maple tree. It doesn't burn well and it smells, it's softer than its hardwood cousin so it's not the most elegant choice for furniture, and if that weren't enough it attracts the box elder bug, a sort of beetle that feeds off it but also likes to colonize in houses.

I walked out into the backyard to scope it out, even though I'm more than familiar with the scene. I leave nothing to chance, or at least I make the attempt. I waited for my wife to go grocery shopping on Saturday morning. She would be worried the whole time if I tried this when she was around, and when she's worried she tends to express it. And when I'm worried I need to be quiet and think, and when she's talking, as I often tell her (sometimes with great emphasis), I can't think. Let's just say we have different styles of doing things.

The tree is about twenty-five feet from the back of

our house, just a few feet into the woods, and it's on the other end of the townhome from where we share a wall with our immediate neighbor. Past this corner of our side of the building is only open grass for some forty feet over to our other neighbor's townhome. So there was no danger of my damaging either of our neighbor's houses, or even of the tree falling onto their lawn.

There were other obstacles, however.

It's not a bulky tree, but it's also far from a sapling. It's about a dozen inches in diameter at its base and about forty feet tall, and it hangs over in an arc so that its top branches were perhaps ten feet from my office's double windows. Two limbs project from the main trunk. One of them goes fairly straight up. The other is the one that bends into and toward our house. If it fell it would likely crash right into the glass that is just behind my right shoulder as I sit at my desk.

All I have is a ten-inch handsaw. I don't own a chainsaw. Why didn't I buy one? First I'm not sure how much of this I'll be doing from here on and they cost about \$300. I could borrow or rent one. But the fact is that I've always liked using hand tools. I admire their simplicity and efficiency. I like the motion and skill they require. And unlike their electrical counterparts they rarely refuse to work, they're comparatively inexpensive, and with a little care they last a long time.

But a bigger problem was that the crotch where the two limbs diverge from the main trunk is about ten and a half feet off the ground. All I have is a six-foot stepladder. And since you can only stand on the next to last rung safely, that effectively makes it five feet high. And I'm only five and a half feet tall. Could I saw well enough with my right arm extended slightly above my head and while trying to keep my balance near the top of a ladder to cut through six inches of

living wood?

It was a nice fall day just before Thanksgiving, crisp but not cold, sunny. The last of the coppery foliage was still holding on for life, but most of it had blanketed the ground in the woods.

I carried my stepladder in one hand and my handsaw in the other. At the base of the box elder I tried to unfold the legs of the ladder but the ground is uneven here, something I had overlooked. I would have to leave it folded up and lean it against the tree. I climbed up a couple of steps, but the ladder wobbled and I quickly came back down. I tried again but this time, while holding the saw in my right hand, I hugged the tree with my left arm (now a literal, though definitely not a figurative, tree hugger). As I ascended the tree grasping the rough dark gray bark I felt a little like a bear (bear cub is more like it), an impression heightened by my black fleece work jacket.

The threatening tree limb was now slightly above the right shoulder of my own human limb. So far mostly good.

I pretended to saw to see if it would work. From this perch the limb looked much bigger. It was only a couple inches thicker than the Christmas trees I used to cut down with a bow saw until a couple of years ago (I no longer care for sawing while lying on the ground). The length of the limb especially took me aback—it rose up to the sky to what seemed like out of sight. It was at a somewhat awkward angle. I would have to raise the saw at an angle slightly over my head, so it would be hard to bear down as much as I probably was going to need to; my right shoulder was the one that helped end my scholastic wrestling career early after several separations, though it's worked fine since I had surgery on it many years ago.

I had my doubts. But to my surprise I just started

sawing!

At first it was tough going, but then the saw started to make its way through. It was awkward on my right arm, but I kept going. The saw made a thin kerf in the wood, and the sawdust sort of oozed out of it. But now the fine particles were falling in my eyes.

I climbed down the ladder, got my safety glasses out of my toolbox. I also got my leather work gloves. I figured I could get more power into my saw strokes without my hand starting to blister, and I could really bare down.

So I was about a quarter of the way through and now I realized this was a go. And then I was a little nervous and I reconsidered. Am I sure exactly how this is going to fall? This could fall into the windows of my office or at least onto our siding, it was taller than our townhome. I didn't do any research before I started, which is unusual for me. I was sawing on the opposite side of the direction I wanted the limb to fall. Would it fall right back on me?

I came down from the tree again and did a quick search on my phone. I found a seemingly authoritative blog [post](#) about felling trees. It said to cut a notch on the side of the tree in the direction you want it to fall, or "face," a few inches below the main cut on the opposite side, or "back."

So now I shifted the ladder over to the other side. But where I had to place the ladder made it doubly awkward for my right arm to make the two upward and downward cuts to form the notch. I did a dry run with my left arm (I'm somewhat ambidextrous, the bitter fruit of a summer I spent in a cast on my right forearm) but it wasn't going to work. So I did the best I could with my right arm. It was quite hard, especially the upper cut angled into the downward cut. The blog post I'd consulted said to saw the notch a third of the way into the tree, but I did much less than that. It would have to do.

Then I moved the ladder back to its original spot and resumed my cutting. I went off into a pleasant sort of meditation where my mind just drifted pleasantly along with the saw and the tree. It was hard work too, I was sweating now in my fleece jacket but I didn't want to stop to take it off.

But maybe two-thirds of the way through the limb a thought struck me. I decided to wait until my wife returned home so she could see the big moment, now that I seemed to have the whole situation under control.

Back in the house I saw that she had texted me that she was on her way home. I relaxed and gathered my strength for the finale. I was standing between our open kitchen and dining room in front of the door that leads onto our patio. The door is made up of a rectangle of glass nearly its whole length (thankfully). I was looking at my phone when suddenly I heard this slight creaking and I looked up—the large limb was falling! It creaked briefly and whack! down it came! And it fell just where I'd wanted it to fall! It couldn't have landed more perfectly. Thank you, Lord!

On the ground, like a downed animal in a hunt, it was huge and primeval. It was sprawled out on our lawn past the corner of our house at the forty-five-degree angle I was shooting for, right into the wide-open expanse of lawn on the side of our house not connected to our building mate. I called my wife and blurted out, "The tree limb fell!"

"What?" she said before I could explain. I hadn't even told her I might take it down that day.

I now had another job on my hand: cutting it up. I didn't want to just discard the main limb, which was thirty feet long, but that means we'd have to buy or make a firepit. I spent nearly three hours more over two days measuring and sawing. My wife and I got a kick out of looking at the fresh cuts, the bright tan outer portion and the small darker



reddish center. When I was done I stacked the twenty or so foot-and-a-half-long logs crosswise in the backyard to dry them out.

Now when I look out my office window and see the cut mark shining bright amid the gray trunks I think that the tree limb is no longer a threat. And I also picture the logs all split into quarters and blazing into the cool summer night as we watch the sparks dissolve into the darkness and mingle with the stars.

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