

# Using Dead or Dying Trees in Your Garden Landscape

By Kathy Wolfe  
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## Many beneficial uses of snags in the home landscape

If you are lucky enough to have a landscape containing trees, you know how magnificent these plants are. During their active lives trees fulfill valuable services, including giving shade, wind cover, and privacy. They act as an air filter, a barrier to soften the impact of rain and prevent soil erosion, a source of food production for humans, birds and insects, and as a beautiful accent to our surroundings.

Unfortunately, trees die. Causes can come from disease, lightning, fire, animal damage, too much shade, drought, root competition or old age. A dead or dying tree is often quickly cut down and carted away without a thought to finding a safe way to prolong its life or to its wildlife value.

Learning to use dead or dying trees in your landscape can enhance important natural biomass and attract and benefit wildlife in your yard. Most birds have difficulty penetrating a live tree with their beaks or claws because the wood is too hard.

A dying tree begins to slough off bark as it decomposes, exposing and softening the wood underneath to decay. This allows insects access under the bark to feed on sapwood. Birds, especially in winter when the ground is snow-covered, rely on eating these insects to provide the protein they need to survive. Bats, bees, brown creepers, nuthatches, Pacific tree frogs, butterflies and other small animals will roost or hide behind loose bark or in bark slits.

Tree cavities are also important for wildlife survival. Woodpeckers have strong enough skulls and beaks to carve cavities in trunks to make their nests. Other birds who don't do the initial hole excavation, i.e. chickadees, owls, and titmice, use abandoned holes to raise their offspring. Hollow snags (standing dead or dying trees) are used by squirrels, martens, porcupines and raccoons for housing.

Snags are used by many birds to nest, roost, shelter, den and feed. Logs (fallen dead or dying trees) make good ground cover for many bird varieties. Mushrooms grow in accumulated areas of organic matter such as tree rot. In turn, mushrooms feed turtles, birds, squirrels and deer. The importance of keeping some of these dead and dying trees in the landscape is obvious.

How can you tell if a tree might be stressed or dying? If sap is running on the bark face, there are splits in the trunk, main limbs are dead or dying, fungus is on the bark, or you see evidence of animal use, such as holes and cavities, the tree may be on its way out.



A tree stump can be imaginatively incorporated into a yard or garden setting. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Types of trees that you may want to turn into a snag include hazard trees with a forked top, weak wood or disease; a shade tree in an area you want sun; a tree whose roots are invading your septic system; or a tree in a group that needs thinning out. If a tree is infected with a fungus, e.g. *Verticillium* or *Armillaria*, that you do not want spread to other areas of your yard, you may want to remove and destroy the tree away from your property. If you have questions about the type of fungus you are dealing with, ask your local county extension agent for an analysis and diagnosis.

Always keep any dead or dying tree away from areas of high activity or close to buildings. Be sure to check your local city or county ordinances or community covenants to ensure leaving them is allowed. It is also very important to hire a licensed, bonded and insured tree expert or arborist to remove large branches and tree tops. Dying trees can be unpredictable and need to be dealt with carefully by a trained specialist.

Should you choose to form a snag, retain other trees and shrubs around it to protect from winds and provide wildlife habitat. Don't remove any more of the damaged or dying tree than is required for safety reasons. Even a high stump can support a lot of wildlife compared with one cut to ground level. Your arborist can cut a jagged top to give a natural look to your snag. You might want some slits or a cavity or two started by the tree expert at the same time.





Making use of dead trees in your yard or garden can yield clever results. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

If you aren't too concerned about leaving your woodland garden overly tidy, downed trees (logs) can be a handy material to make nooks and crannies for plants in the garden. Larger pieces can form focal points. Hollow stumps can become unique planters. Nurse logs add interest when ferns, mosses and various mushrooms sprout on the surface. In large areas, prunings from big trees can be used to line paths, curtail erosion and mark off planting areas.

If leaving large portions of dying trees is not for you, there are other ways to utilize dead tree wood. Try using the lumber or stumps for home projects such as benches and tables; cross-cutting wood ovals to lay out for pathways; making an art carving; or

chipping the wood and bark up to apply as a mulch in the area where the tree once stood.

Incorporating a dead or dying tree into your landscape can be rewarding by providing both visual interest and maintaining natural habitat. The wildlife will sing (or hoot or buzz or croak) your praises.



**Left:** Former trees often provide homes to insects and other animals in your yard or garden. **Right:** This snag in the rainforest became a nurse log for a new tree. *Photos by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

## RESOURCES:

- “Deadwood for Wildlife.” Jerry Hassinger, Wildlife Biologist, The Pennsylvania Game Commission, and Jack Payne, Extension Wildlife Specialist. The Pennsylvania State University, Penn State Extension. <https://extension.psu.edu/dead-wood-for-wildlife>

- “Downed Wood.” Jean Colley, Arboretum Foundation. Washington Park Arboretum. Bulletin pdf, Spring 2010. [https://www.arboretumfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/colley\\_downed-wood.pdf](https://www.arboretumfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/colley_downed-wood.pdf)
- “Dead Trees and Living Creatures: The Snag Ecology of Idaho.” Nongame Leaflet #13 pdf. <https://idfg.idaho.gov/press/dead-trees-host-living-creatures-0>
- “6 Ways to Upcycle Dead Trees.” Sheeren Othman. Do It Yourself, Arbor Day Foundation. October 13, 2016. [www.arbodayblog.org/diy/6-ways-upcycle-dead-trees](http://www.arbodayblog.org/diy/6-ways-upcycle-dead-trees)
- “Snags – The Wildlife Tree.” Living with Wildlife. Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife [www.wdfw.wa.gov/living/snags](http://www.wdfw.wa.gov/living/snags)
- “Turning Deadwood into Homes for Wildlife.” Olwen Woodier, National Wildlife Federation. December 1, 1997. <https://www.nwf.org/Magazines/National-Wildlife/1998/Turning-Deadwood-into-Lively-Homes-for-Wildlife>
- “Snags, or wildlife trees: Cultivate, don’t cart away, dead, dying or hazard trees.” Margaret Roach, A Way to Garden blog. <https://awaytogarden.com/snags-wildlife-trees-cultivate-dont-cart-away-dead-dying-hazard-trees/>

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.