

Simon Fairlie Scythes: Technical Leaflet 4

HOW NOT TO BREAK YOUR SCYTHE (ESPECIALLY WITH A BUSH BLADE)

A supplement to information provided in *The Scythe Book*

I am currently getting a few people reporting broken snaths. Approximately one snath out of 50 snaps within a year of being bought. At least half the breakages occur with bush blades.

I have reported these breakages to the manufacturers of the snaths. Their response is that the snaths, for obvious reasons, are designed to be as light as practically possible. The only way to make them stronger is to make them bulkier; and to do this for the two per cent of people who suffer breakages would do a disservice to all the people who use the snaths successfully.

I am in agreement with the manufacturers. In most cases, people who have broken snaths admit that they were “thrashing it a bit.” There are few of us who have not, at some point in our lives, found out through an expensive mistake how to use a well-designed tool properly. In cases where a scythe is receiving abuse, if the snath is strong enough to resist the blade may bend or snap instead (this is the fate of most English “patent” blades, on stout hickory snaths).

This briefing should be read by all beginners at scything, but it particularly applies to bush blades. These blades are the equivalent of a billhook on a stick, and obviously the snath is more fragile than a billhook handle. If wielded at thick stems of woody weeds when blunt, and without due care, a bush blade can place enormous pressure on the snath

Breakages occur mainly as a result of excessive leverage from the blade at the point where the blade is attached to the snath. This leverage may be excessive, (a) because the blade is set wrong, and the scythe is being used badly; or (b) because you are hacking too hard in which case the scythe is probably blunt; or both.

Here are some rules to observe:

(1) Sharpen the blade. If you don't get it sharp enough for your material, you will find yourself hacking at the vegetation, like an enraged golfer in a bunker. How to sharpen is explained elsewhere.

(2) Make sure that the hafting angle is set acutely, according to the instructions provided in *The Scythe Book*, and in my technical leaflet *Adjusting the Angle of the Blade to the Snath*. A wide hafting angle means that (a) you are hacking rather than slicing the vegetation; (b) more of the cutting is performed by the far end of the blade, which causes most leverage at the point where the blade is attached to the snath.

(3) After 5 minutes mowing, check that the grub nuts on the clamp have not come loose.

(4) Mow in a circular motion, rather than a hacking motion. Think of how you cut a tomato with a knife. Or think of the evolution of the guillotine. The original model had its blade parallel with ground, and made a messy job. Eventually someone suggested putting the blade at an angle, and that gave a much cleaner cut. With a more circular motion, when you hit an obstruction such as a hidden tree stump, you do not meet it head on with the edge of the blade, but, more likely, the point of the blade buries itself in stump, causing no damage.

(5) With the bush blade in particular, you need to give some thought to the lay of the blade (see *Adjusting the Angle of the Blade to the Snath*). The bush blade is as heavy as a lightweight billhook, and will cut the same sort of material. When you cut woody shoots with a billhook, you do not cut perpendicular to the stem, but at an oblique angle, since the blade slices easier along the grain of the wood. Your action with the bush scythe should be similar: cut at a slightly upwards angle, so that once the blade has a purchase on the wood, it is stretching it away from the ground. I would therefore advise setting a bush blade with the lay of the blade pointing slightly more upward than on a grass blade.

(6) If you come to a very tough plant which you think might damage the blade, but don't want to get another tool, bend the plant right over onto the ground with your left foot and hold it there so that you can slice into the stem almost horizontally, with a series of gentle cuts. Wear boots! I have cut 1.5 inch diameter burdock with a grass blade using this method, without causing damage to the blade.