



## Why Not Burn?

Ice storms, thunderstorms, tropical storms and hurricanes leave their mark on our woods and yards. Lots of broken limbs and debris are left in their wake. Whether a storm has left its mark, or you are doing some pruning and yard cleanup, landowners often wonder how to dispose of this woody debris.

In most locations, burning this material presents a risk of escaped wildfire that can threaten lives, homes and forestland. A good alternative to burning this material is to build a brush pile for wildlife. Brush piles are a valuable habitat component for many wildlife species, especially in areas where good natural cover is lacking. An added environmental benefit is that a decaying brush pile releases carbon into the atmosphere much more slowly than burning does.

Brush piles provide wildlife with cover for escaping predators, resting, feeding, sheltering from bad weather and sometimes for raising young. Animals that use brush piles regularly include mammals, such as rabbits, chipmunks, skunks, raccoons and foxes; birds, such as towhees, thrashers, cardinals, sparrows and bobwhite quail; reptiles and amphibians, such as fence lizards, box turtles and gray treefrogs, and a host of insects and other invertebrates.

*Cover photo courtesy of Chris Taylor, www.wildlovephotography.com*

### For More Information

For more information about VDOF services or programs, please contact your local Virginia Department of Forestry office or visit:

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# BRUSH PILES FOR WILDLIFE

*Don't Burn Brush  
- Build A Shelter For Wildlife*



Virginia Department of Forestry



## Where to Build a Brush Pile

Building a brush pile requires no special tools and only a little initial planning. Good locations for brush piles include woodland edges, field borders, fence corners, forest openings and open areas near water. A brush pile can help prevent soil erosion if placed at the top of a forming gully, although it should not be placed in the middle of an established wash. Two to four brush piles per acre are optimal, but even a single pile will prove beneficial to wildlife. Because brush piles may attract animals like groundhogs and snakes that are not wanted near the home or garden, it is usually best to place piles some distance from houses.

## Building a Brush Pile

A long-lasting brush pile will have a base that supports the brush while providing tunnels and air spaces underneath. It will have a limby, leafy top that conceals the interior space and is dense enough to block rain and snow. Effective brush piles are at least six to eight feet wide – usually larger – and at least four to six feet tall.

The first step in brush pile construction is to make a sturdy base. Use larger logs or limbs, preferably rot-resistant ones such as oak, locust or cedar. Ideally, the base logs should be at least four inches in diameter. Place the first layer of logs side by side about a foot apart. Stack the next layer of logs on top, perpendicular to the first layer. Continue to stack layers crosswise in this way until the structure is several feet high. To use a tree stump as part of the base, lean large limbs against it in a tepee fashion.

Flat stones, cinder blocks or even old tires can also be incorporated into the base.

Once the base is complete,

pile smaller limbs and brush on top at various angles to make a large mound. Almost any woody yard or logging waste, and even old Christmas trees, can become part of the pile. The lighter materials on top will form an interlacing canopy that protects the space beneath from the elements.

## Maintenance

Over time, a brush pile will settle, and new material can be added. After several years, a brush pile will settle and rot to a point that it no longer has much open space underneath. Building a new brush pile nearby will provide a home for any remaining animals. Don't dismantle the old pile; it will continue to decompose, enrich the soil, and provide a home for invertebrates and microorganisms for many years.



*Photo courtesy of Chris Taylor, [www.wildlovephotography.com](http://www.wildlovephotography.com)*



*Photo courtesy of Virginia Dept. of Game and Inland Fisheries*

