

# HOW NOT TO BUILD A FENCE



by Jack Ryan

Putting up a fence may seem like the simplest thing in the world. That's not necessarily so!

When we moved to Whippoorwill Hill, we found that our property was half of what had once been a nine acre lot. The lot had been completely fenced — a long time ago. But most of our fence was still in pretty good shape. Unfortunately, there was no fence at all to separate our half from our neighbor's half. Now, I am a firm believer in Robert Frost's adage that "good fences make good neighbors", especially when the neighbors include two hunting dogs and two boys with dirt bikes.

Well, I was sure that my neighbor didn't want his hunting dogs running off and getting lost or into trouble chasing whatever livestock we could eventually have. So when I volunteered to do the work myself if he would share the bill for the fencing, I was surprised when he said he couldn't afford it. Turns out that the old fence around part of his share of the lot was in pretty bad shape in many places. To hold his dogs, he would have to not only fence the quarter mile between us, but a good bit of the line between him and the next neighbor.

And they never will. Although they didn't say so in their catalog, Musser Forests sells largely to folks who want the trees for landscaping, so they carry the thornless variety. I certainly cannot fault them for not telling me what I did not ask. But I would recommend to anybody who buys anything: never read **anything** into an advertisement. Never assume that a desirable feature is or isn't in the product on the basis of what is **not** said in the ad. Little time would have been lost by a letter asking "Are your trees thorny or not?"

Even the thorny locusts may not have been such a good idea. They are, after all, trees, and trees are not necessarily fast growers. A living fence must **grow**, and growth takes time. Eventually our locusts will be big enough to form a barrier. What do I do to keep in small stock in the mean time? Our only trees which have made good growth are about a half-dozen that are in a slight wash. They get extra water run-off and, I believe, some of the effluent from the neighbor's septic system. So extra water and fertilizer probably would have helped my locusts to grow faster.

would be faster growing than my locusts. Right now it looks like blackberries and roses may be good bets. Both are thorny and can be propagated fairly easily. So I have not had to buy them by the hundreds like I did the locusts. Just remember that, while they are faster growing than the locusts, they could use extra water, too. Give them a hand when they need it.

The air rifle finally convinced the dogs to stay home, but the barbed wire and the few transplanted blackberries and roses would not keep in the geese that I wanted to try out as lawn mowers for the orchard/front yard. So I nailed up some 2 x 2's onto the two-foot posts as extensions and put up three foot chicken wire alongside the barbed wire — a task which would have been much easier if done in the first place.

The fence held the goslings until they were two months old. It probably would have been fine for them. One rainy evening we arrived home to find all six geese dead, with two partially eaten. There were tracks of a big dog in the mud. Of course, no one had seen anything. My three foot fence had kept in the

He would rather put up a tiny pen for the dogs. Unfortunately, the dogs were only penned up when he was at home, so I still needed the line fence. But I couldn't really afford a good fence either. But instead of spending the money I would save from not building a fence for a camper trailer and a big motor boat like my neighbor, I thought about how to get the most fence for what money I did have, and then put up a fence.

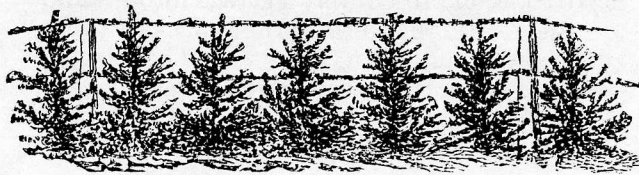
I decided that a living fence would be best for us. I'd seen the ad where the multiflora rose stopped the truck, so I figured that it ought to stop dirt bikes and dogs, too. But I also read that multiflora roses tend to "escape" from fence rows and cause havoc in the neighborhood. So I decided to try some other barrier. I finally settled on honey locust — locusts are notoriously thorny and the honey locust has edible seeds, besides being a legume to add nitrogen to the soil.

My plan was to put up treated wood posts and a four-foot field fence (a heavy woven wire) along those areas where I wanted to insure air flow — beside the house and by the garden. Then I would put up three strands of barbed wire to make a two-foot fence the rest of the way to keep dirt bikes home. I bought an air rifle to teach the dogs what the fence meant until the living fence grew up. The best laid plans sometimes go astray.

Honey locusts, it seems, come in two varieties: thorned and thornless. Most seed and plant catalogs advertise the thornless variety since it makes a "friendlier" landscape tree. When I finally found someone that **didn't** advertise the thornless variety (Musser Forests), I was delighted. I sent off an order for 1000 trees — enough to fence off my entire property with honey locusts. Three years later my trees still do not have thorns.

And that brings up another point: whatever you plant for a living fence (or orchard, etc.) needs extra water the first year or so. Trees and shrubs to be planted along the fence are being transplanted. They have lost some of their roots and root hairs. They need some extra tender loving care if they are to survive the first year or so until they become established. Sprinkling fertilizer along the fence is not much of a problem, since it is not done very often. But watering a quarter mile of fence, or more, is quite a task. I just was not able to do that the first year and my fence suffered as a result. Some of the trees have hardly grown. Then I discovered drip irrigation. Water is dripped out of a hose every two feet instead of spraying all over the place. As a result, the water goes where it belongs, into the soil, instead of onto leaves where it can evaporate away. I would recommend laying down a permanent line if you can. I couldn't afford that, but I have been making good use of two hundred feet of hose that doubles for use in our garden. I use Submatic drip lines (Submatic Irrigation Systems, Box 246, Lubbock, TX 79408) because I found that the company did their best to answer my questions about getting set up. My drip hose has been especially useful these past two summers when the heat and drought kept the trees from getting even the normal amount of rain water.

Perhaps extra water and fertilizer the first year would have made a big difference with my fence. Since I failed with the water, I have been trying other plants, hoping that something



geese, but had not kept out a determined dog. Perhaps no fence would have kept out such an animal, although I have had no trouble with our chickens, which have a four foot field fence around them. So now, if I want geese again, I'll have to add on higher fencing again.

The moral of this story would seem to be: When you put up a fence, put up a good one the first time. Put up one that is likely to keep in whatever you want to raise, and will keep out whatever your neighbor is apt to want. I could not afford to do that in the beginning. In the end, though, I could not afford not to! It'll probably waste more time and money doing it the cheap way instead of the right way.

One more thing: Although my card file has about ten references (including one book) on the subject of fences, not one mentioned one very important thing about putting up field fencing. This kind of fairly heavy woven fencing is fastened at one end, unrolled, and stretched tight before being stapled to the intervening posts. What nobody mentioned was the fact that the ends should form a loop around the post with each strand wrapped back around itself as it comes up to the post. Staples are only needed at the ends to keep the fence from getting worked up or down. Perhaps that is obvious enough to everyone but me. In any case, I just wrapped the wire part way round the post, stapled the ends, and tightened the wires. A couple of days later the tension had rotated the posts in the ground so that the wire had loosened a bit and the corner braces' nails were pulled loose.

Next time I need to put up a fence, I'll know just what to do. Here's hoping that when you put up a fence, you'll know what not to do! 