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**Trail Building Tips for Forest Owners**

As an owner of rural property, imagine being able to easily walk, ski, or ride your ATV through your woods to get to your favorite haunts. While the task of developing a trail may seem a bit daunting, the effort spent developing trails is well worth the benefits they provide. Whether you own just a few acres or a large spread of rural property, trails can make it much easier to enjoy your property. Before tackling any project in your forest it always pays to follow this simple advice, "get educated and then get active".

Good trails require planning, so avoid the impulse to start hacking out a trail before you think the process through. You can avoid unnecessary work, environmental damage, and other frustrating results if you follow some simple and logical steps when embarking on a trail building project. The first step is determining the intended use of the trails. For many a simple walking path or hiking trail will fit the bill, but ski, horseback, snowmobile, and ATV trails are among the options. Multipurpose trails can be used for both recreation and work projects like firewood harvesting.

Once you've determined the purpose of the trail, obtain a topographic (topo) map and aerial photograph of your property. The map and photo help you locate important features like streams, wetlands, steep slopes, old roads, and property boundaries. US Geologic Survey topographic maps can be obtained from local camping stores and outfitters, or on the Web at

the USGS topographic maps home page. Visit your local US Department of Agriculture Service Center for aerial photos.

The next step is to begin exploring the property to locate important features like ponds, roads, old foundations, rock outcrops, scenic views, large trees, and wildflower sites. You can note the location of these features on your topo map, or create your own map to do so.

Mapping out the important features takes time, but you will learn valuable information in the process. As you explore the property consider how seasonal conditions will impact trails.

What looks like a good place for a trail in August may look very different on a soggy April day.

Avoid routing trails directly up steep slopes and through thick vegetation, wet areas, or sensitive habitats. You can often run trails next to wetlands and unique areas so you can enjoy them without harming them.

Trail layout is the next step, and a most helpful item for this is plastic surveyors flagging which can be purchased at most hardware stores. With your map and flagging in hand you can now lay out a potential trail route. Use plenty of flagging to mark the route so you'll be able to easily walk it afterwards. Resist the urge to immediately grab your tools and start clearing the trail. Instead, walk the proposed route and critically evaluate how well you've laid it out.

Involve family members and friends in the evaluation process if possible. Once you've made all the route changes you deem necessary, you're ready to move on to the construction phase.

Constructing trails can be strenuous work. Try to avoid setting over ambitious goals for completing your trail, as the saying goes "slow and steady gets the job done". If your trail project involves the use of chainsaws, tractors, or other power equipment make sure you can complete the task safely. One key consideration in trail construction is the width of the trail.

While a trail width of three or four feet may be enough for a hiking trail, eight-foot wide treads are recommended for horse and ATV trails. Pay close attention to trail drainage to avoid erosion problems. Grade the trail or add structures like waterbars to divert water off the trail.

The quicker water drains off the trail the better.

For assistance with a trail project contact your local Soil and Water Conservation District, Cornell University Cooperative Extension office, or a local nature center. For additional information on forestland activities that will benefit your objectives, visit Cornell's forestry website at [www.ForestConnect.info](http://www.ForestConnect.info), contact your local office of Cornell University Cooperative Extension, or join the New York Forest Owners Association through their website at [www.nyfoa.org](http://www.nyfoa.org).

This article was written by Kevin Mathers, Extension Educator, CCE Broome County

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