

Pup Starting Pen Winterizing

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Introduction

When fall hits in the mid-Atlantic area it's time for me to start winterizing my starting pen. Winterizing a starting pen? What the heck does that mean? Well, rabbits need to have a dry place to live when it rains plus they can't be in the open when snow is on the ground. Brush piles are the primary cover for your rabbits. Unfortunately, they decay over the summer and often can't provide the necessary winter shelter after just a year or two. So what do you do to keep your rabbits alive and healthy during the more difficult times of the year? Here is what I do for rabbit management. I've also added some notes from my discussions with friends in other parts of the country.



Critters

When the leaves fall and the high grass dies down, rabbits in the open are exposed to all kinds of flying or furry creatures. In my pen there are often many places where the fence starts to sag from a deer jumping over it, where an adjacent tree has fallen and is now close to the fence, or where some critter has decided to dig under or eat a small hole in a weak spot. The barbed wire along the fence top usually prevents much sagging, but I have noticed that sometimes my T-bar fence posts are bent over a little from being hit. Even though my fence is close to 6', a bent post makes a nice easy runway for a fox to jump in. I've also had a number of trees drop during storms and this always causes a real problem if they hit a post and take a good piece of fence down with them.

You absolutely need to walk your fence line on a regular basis and check for any place where a fox or cat can get into your pen. One of the worst things that can happen is to have a fox get in and decide to make your pen his new home. I've been through the hassle of putting traps in my pen and then lifting them up whenever I have hounds running. I have my traps set near a nail on a tree so they can be quickly lifted and hooked. The problem is they need to be recovered and scent put down again. Foxes are smart and won't come around a trap once you disturbed it too often.

Although I live in a wooded area with very few neighbors, I still have a few traps set outside my pen for foxes and stray cats. I mostly catch possums though. Finally a few years back an old hound man told me an easier way to keep both

foxes and house cats out. Just buy a bottle of coyote scent and put a few drops of it along your fence line where you think a fox or cat might come close. Coyotes eat these critters and a few drops of scent every 30-40 yards along my fence-line will insure they stay well clear.

Owls and Tree Branches

Owls and hawks are another problem. I can't take all the trees down in my pen, particularly the tall ones around the outside of my pen, but I do let a lot of small trees grow during the summer months inside my pen. I also let the shoots grow from the stumps of larger trees that I've cut down. This will happen if you cut the stump high enough that it isn't killed. The pictures show what I'm describing. These tree branch bushes provide low cover from owls during the summer, plus serve as one of my best sources of brush pile replenishment in the fall.

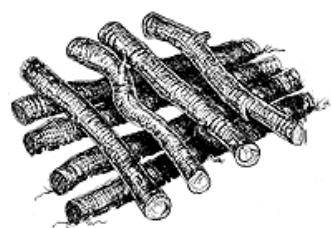


Another source of low cover and brush replenishment are the many small trees that spring up in my pen during the summer. Their branches are too small and thick to support an owl, and when they grow in groups, their leaves offer good protection from flying critters. I usually let these trees grow a year or two until their trunks are around two inches, a good time for fall harvesting.

Harvesting

The best time to harvest your trees and replenish your brush piles is in the fall just before the leaves drop. That way the leaves dry out in the pile and provide a thicker blanket for both cover and insulation. The picture shows a typical pile of trees cut from the nearby stand. Make sure you don't cut shorter than about 6 inches above the ground or the tree might not grow a new branch again.

Some of my brush piles are made with an underlying set of larger logs with a piece of heavy plastic cover over the top. Above this I position the cut branches and leaves. In some cases I just have the branches which last for about a year before needing



replenishing. I've also found that I can simply pile these branches on top of existing briar patches and achieve the same winterization effect.



One additional use I have for straight trunks (left) is to place them along my fence line aprons. I mentioned that critters, including both foxes and snapping turtles, seem to continually dig little holes under my fence. They target places where the logs along my apron have rotted out or been moved from the fence by pups. New logs are heavy and seem to eliminate the problem where I put them.

Christmas Tree Brush Piles

I do have one brush pile out in the open made entirely of old Christmas trees. I used to stop at a Christmas Tree lot the day after Christmas and load up my pickup with unused trees. I've also picked them up at the dump before. One nice thing about using old trees is that they still provide cover even a few years after they dry out. In my case, as you can see at left, the old trees soon cover with briars and vines making them even thicker for cover.



I have some friends in the Midwest that use these type of piles all the time. I prefer to lean them against a couple of short logs though so it's easier for rabbits to get under them.

Drainage

I've found over the years that a wet rabbit doesn't last too long. You absolutely need to provide a place where your rabbits will stay dry. I have a hill covered with evergreens on about 1/4th of my pen. Here I let the underbrush grow all over the place plus I still replenish brush piles there. As for my other piles, they are located on slightly raised ground with thick cover or plastic above as mentioned.

Winter Feeding

One item I didn't mention that with the removal of low branches and trees, you may also be removing the cover near your feed boxes. I conveniently locate my feed boxes adjacent to the piles with an easy, protected access between each. Notice in the picture my brush pile located directly behind the feeder.



Owls and hawks will concentrate on a place where rabbits tend to go, particularly if it's during the winter and the rabbits are on top of the snow. We had a serious amount of snow (3') after one storm here this past winter. In some places the drifts almost reached the top of my fence. I kept the front of the boxes open but could see after a couple of days that the rabbits had dug in from the back right at the edge of the brush pile. I guess they knew where the safest place to get to the food was.



Kennels

Although this article is about starting pen winterization, I had my camera with me and decided to take a picture of one of my kennels that I've just about finished putting new insulation around. I use Styrofoam insulation sheets to completely surround each box, except for the

front entry door. It's light, easy to cut to the right size and can be attached with small screws. It has always worked to keep my hounds warm even in the worst winter storms.