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Axes and hatchets

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- Gear reviews and tests - Edged tools - Axes and hatchets -



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Description :

An Axe and hatchets discussion and comparison.

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Even old guys who think that they've given good advice get to learn a few things as they look back over what they've written. I pretty much stand by what I've written here with a few exceptions. Firstly after using a Gransfors Scandinavian Forest Axe for some time I've come to believe that it's the best light woods axe I'm ever likely to handle, 25" handle or not. For sure the handle is a little long - but it balances so perfectly that I'll always find room to carry it. I wouldn't change a thing about it! Perhaps the second point is more important. I say below that I wouldn't worry too much about horizontal grain.... Well my old cheap axe did last a long time with a lot of work. I have been looking at some axes recently though that not only had horizontal grain but part of the handle was dark brown heartwood. Despite having no use, one of the axes had started to develop a split in the handle just from drying out. This is an accident waiting to happen. The last point is minor: I had commented that the grain in the handle of the Hults showed that it had been cut from small trees. Supposedly young trees have wood with much more flexibility and this is a good point! You might get a regular axe handle for \$10, but one cut from small trees (with pronounced curve to the grain) costs about three times that. I sure hope people don't mind me pointing out my mistakes rather than being tidy and rewriting the page: I just don't operate that way.

I was looking at axes a little while back, in this little town in the middle of logging country. When I saw one that was good I grabbed it right away! Even though I bought it at a logging equipment store, I got little direction. This is the way of things these days, when the salesperson is likely to be someone just hired to sell and maintain inventory. Time flies! When I first arrived here 25 years ago, I wouldn't have gotten out of the store with the axe unless I had been given a test on axe selection and use!

Firstly, even I was thinking that perhaps I make too much of handle grain. After all I have been using a cheap axe for truck use for longer than a decade. This axe has the worst grain in the handle that I've ever seen - horizontal. Finally it broke for no apparent reason. As you can see the bottom of the handle has no gouges or dents to show abuse. So here are a couple of pictures of what NOT to get..





Here's the selection stuff:

1. The grain of the handle should be as close to vertical as possible.

I'll have to sand more - but you can see that this is close.



Axes and hatchets

Normally the butt is painted. Here's the view from the side.



And from below.



If your new axe or hatchet has arrived at great expense from some exclusive dealer and has grain going from side to side - I wouldn't worry too much. The wood will be sound and unless you are logging with it on a daily basis, I doubt it

Axes and hatchets

will matter that much. Notice the curve in the grain in the picture of the butt, which shows that pretty small hickory trees are being used now!

2 . The head should be of good shape and correct temper.

If the axe is hard to sharpen with a file then it has good hardness - you should have to work hard with a file to remove metal! You might try sneaking an axe file over to the axe section of store... Just as important it should have the characteristic of toughness. You won't find this out until you hit a hard knot and the edge hopefully dulls slightly instead of chipping.

Here's a picture of the head showing the general shape and finish.



Here's a close up of the label - with some interesting stuff. Despite being sharper than any axe I've found in a store in many years - it informs you correctly that it hasn't really been sharpened. It's up to you to put the bevel you need on it. I like the bit about being tempered correctly for Australian hardwoods. This is a good way of saying that is tempered hard and tough - so don't hit any rocks with it - or you'll be a long time resharpener!



Hopefully the pictures describe what a good axe or hatchet should be like. The one thing that is hard to show is sighting along the blade to see that it lines up with the centre of the knob on the end of the handle. For this you have to set the axe edge up on a counter top, stand back and sight. This makes it a lot easier.

3. The length of the handle matters, and this length should match a head weight for a given purpose.

Generally in books, the author will give a little general information on axes, and leave lots out. It's hard to get good information on axes and axe personship, despite the widespread use of axes and very dangerous nature of the tool. Unfortunately you have to start with some basic advice, and learn by doing - not the best practice with such a deadly tool.

Authors on outdoor recreation will usually divide axes into three categories, full size, shorter and lighter camp axes and hatchets. This doesn't tell you very much!

The Full Sized Axe:

Surprisingly I haven't seen many of these lately. A full sized axe has a handle length of around 36" or just under a metre. If you hold one in the store (with the blade edge up) and lower the head to the floor, the head should hit the floor well in front of your feet. If you hold such an axe properly, it can never hit your feet or body if you miss what you are chopping. Because of it's length it doesn't need a particularly heavy head, but is hard to use until you learn accuracy with such a long handle. This type of axe is the only type swung in an arc to chop or split wood.

The axe I bought yesterday is NOT a full sized axe despite being large. It is a limbing axe used to chop branches from fallen trees. It has a 28" handle and a sharp 2 kg (4 1/2 lb head) for short controlled chops. There are a lot of 28" handled axes around - but these are the most deadly axes of all for the inexperienced user - especially for splitting wood! The weight of the head and sharpness makes them so. The only time these axes are swung in an arc is when chopping down trees where the cut is at waist height AND a glancing blow cannot hit the body or feet. Usually the axe will be swung so that the head travels in a straight line at the target. These axes are used with very little force because of the heavy head. Again - they are used with VERY LITTLE force.

The person new to axes is always advised to get a full sized axe for safety reasons. Usually they find that they are hopelessly inaccurate and grip the handle closer to the head. Now they are using a shorter more deadly axe. I guess we see why axes are so dangerous! You not only have to buy a full sized axe to be safe - you have to use it as such as well.

The heavy axe is great to have for a vehicle, or for people who want to collect wood for carving etc, but very limited as a tool for survival, where cutting smaller trees will make it more tiring to use.

The Camp Axe

I like the description in Mors Kochanski's book, "Bushcraft". If you tuck the end of the handle into your armpit, your fingers should be able to curl around the end of the head to hold it in place. That's a good way of determining length of handle easily in the store without carrying tape measures. It'll work out to between 21" and 23", and 22" seems to be the common size. I notice that the high quality Gransfors (hunters or short forest) axes are 19" and I think I'd find this a little short in use. It would be easier to carry strapped to a pack frame though. Their forest axe has a 25" handle and two pound head, which is a little too long and heavy.

The head on this type of axe usually varies between 1 1/2 lbs and 2lbs. The lighter the head the easier to transport and use one handed as a hatchet (held close to head). The heavier the head the more effective cutter it will be. For bush purposes the lighter the better.

The Hatchet

Read "Hatchet" by Gary Paulsen and you'll want one for survival use! There's also "The Woodsman and his Hatchet" by Bud Cheff Sr. They are fine books. I still believe that more modern authors have little on Nessmuk and Horace Kephart when writing of the hatchet and its use.

The hatchet most likely to be seen in hardware stores now is usually cheap and of poor quality. The blade will be too thick and the steel in it not likely to hold a good edge being usually far too soft or rarely hard but brittle. You want something tough as well as hard and these qualities come at a price. Since very few good hatchets are sold compared to good axes, the hatchet may end up costing more.

A good properly bevelled and sharpened hatchet is an amazing tool which cuts out of all proportion to its size. It is also inherently dangerous because people want to make it cut like a larger axe, use too much force and make a mistake or get tired. The short edge that makes it efficient also makes it easy to miss with! If you like to push the limits - go straight to a camp axe and forget the hatchet.

4. A sheath constructed to protect both the edge and you.

A sharp axe or hatchet deserves more than a cheap sheath bought at the hardware store. I happened to have some scraps of thick sole leather and an old belt. I used pop rivets because I don't care what the sheath looks like so long as it is resistant to cuts.



Maintenance:

You use an axe file and a set of stones to set the bevel and sharpen the edge. It's a lot of work with a good axe because of the hardness and toughness of the steel. Shortcuts like using a grinder will remove the temper, simple as that. Soaking the handle with linseed oil will keep the head tight - but using water will weaken it as it repeatedly dries and is wet again to tighten it.

Just putting a straight bevel on the edge that is the same on both sides is about all I can do. Really the edge should be convex, and the blade should be slightly thicker in the centre than front and back of the edge, so that it jams less in deep cuts. I believe that this is a lost skill now.

Summing up:

Axes and hatchets

A good camp axe or hatchet is a very versatile woodcutting and shaping tool. You just cannot do the same work with a long knife. The long knife is probably much safer to use though, despite appearances. If you just want to cut wood with the least effort, use a saw. I personally don't like steel handled axes like Estwings - just because I think a wood handle gives a lot more possibilities in grips along the handle. Just a personal thing..

Post-scriptum :

If you have questions, criticisms, or things to add - email me please.

Original article at [OldJimbo's site](#).