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A guide to choosing the right

Wilderness Edged Wood Cutting Tools.

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- Gear reviews and tests - Edged tools -



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Description :

Axe, hatchet, saw, machete, knife... What to choose, what works and what does not.

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Depending on the region of the world you are living in or traveling and what is your specific attraction in the outdoors, you will certainly need a very different set of tools to live or sojourn in the wilderness. Let's start by a review of the available tools, and we will check their adequacy to some tasks.

Tools

Pocket knife



The pocket knife is the basic tool that I always carry with me. It can be multiblades, like the Swiss knives, or simple big folder, with or without a blade lock. It rarely leaves me, and is often largely sufficient for any task I encounter during hiking. I generally carry a [Swiss knife](#) or an [Opinel](#), or a Spyderco Military. Pocket knives with tools can be really useful [\[Pocket Knives\]](#).

Fixed blade



A fixed blade does have a few advantages over folding knives. It is more sturdy, it is more readily available. Can be safely pushed, pulled or used to chop. Fixed blades can be any size, but for convenience, we will call blades bigger than 10" or 25 cm machetes.

Most US outdoors experts consider that a 7" blade (17.5 cm)is the maximum one can carry and use conveniently.

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I tend to agree, but I personally favor the 4" (10 cm) size for reasons I will expose later on. I like [Nordic knives](#) a lot [[Knives](#)].

The blades that are convex, or the Scandinavian grinds, with only one big edge bevel are particularly useful for carving and working with wood, in my opinion.

There are a lot of discussions about which kind of steel (carbon or stainless), which kind of hardness, etc. I do think the main idea is to get a knife that can do what we expect from it. A big part of this for me lays simply into the ergonomics of the handle. For the rest, most modern steels show the same kind of performances, and though they are heavily discussed by called or so-called knives experts, they are largely sufficient for most users, as the differences are marginal. Exceptions to this are in my experience very few.

A specific class of this type of tools is what the manufacturers call the survival knife. They are generally bigger blades, heavy, not functional as knives, and though the fashion was started by the movie Rambo, they do not really respond to the expression of a need of real life. Some them of are designed to be used as pry-bars as well as (or instead of?) knives. Generally they do not cut well, if they cut at all.

Another category are the "tactical" knives, nowadays fashion designed for military personnel, but more often sold as fashion items to terrorized city civilians. Let's face it, piercing car doors or armors is not a feature you generally use in the outdoors, and a hooked blade does not have many uses except opening bellies.

Do not misread me, big knives have their place, but the point I want to make, is that there is probably no unique ultimate cutting tool.

Indeed, fixed blades can be battoned to cut bigger pieces of wood, and so can some folding knives. The construction will have to match the planned use.

Thye discussion about fixed blades and the one that are the best for outdoors-men cover thousand of pages of internet forums, and books, some times as old as Nessmuck's and the only shortcut is: "The one you like, feel confident with, and does what you need to do".

Machetes, goloks, parangs, khukuris, bolos, big blades

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These are big bladed knives whose primary purpose is to clean vegetation, limb small trees, cut bamboo, and provide various cutting tasks adapted to rather tropical , equatorial, jungle or bush environments. Sizes there go from 10" (25cm) to more than 30" (75 cm) blades, depending on the tool specificities. Traditional asiatic blades do very well, but the classical south-american machete is also an excellent and cheap choice.

The Nepali kukhuri is often chosen by outdoors men, because it is halfway between a hatchet and a knife.

My preferred tool there is without any doubt the [Golok](#) or [Parang](#), but I do not disdain a 10\$ machete [\[Big blades\]](#).

It is to be noted that a lot of what is said on these big bladed tool's performance comes from the "fear" factor, and I have come to think that any big piece of any sharpened steel will impress its user. One thing though about machetes, they have generally poorly ground edges, and very little work into giving it a proper edge profile (see further) can bring a lot in performance and ease of use (up to 3 or 4 times more efficient).

Convex blades are very good performers for this kind of tool.

Some other tools are also available like the different hooks (Bill hook, Fin hook...) and garden implements, Some of these tools might do very well in the outdoors.

Large bladed tools are excellent for clearing dense or intricate vegetation, cleaning and working bamboos, but quickly find their limits if felling a 8 cm diameter tree is required, or the wood is hard or seasoned.

Hatchet



The hatchet is a good light choice for light chopping work. It does come often to equivalent efficiency to a small machete, maybe with more chopping power. It has to be noted though that the hatchet is a tool that requires experience and caution, yet is less dangerous than a big blade, because it has less edge. The choice is really a question of personal preference.

The small "mini" models like the Gransfors Brucks or Wetterlings minis are very light and yet good investments for the hiker.

I like the [Japanese Nata Azumagata cleaver and Massano Keiryu knife](#). [[Hatchets](#)]

Axes



The axe is the (non-motorised) tool that provides the maximum power to fell or limb a tree. Axes sizes, and weights may differ widely, and their characteristics adapt to the type of work to do, from felling big trees to doing carpentry work, or even shaping wood. I like the [Gränsfors Bruks Small Forest Axe VS Roselli Long Axe](#). [[Axes](#)]

Axes are very powerful for the weight, But they are not the best tool for massively clearing vegetation.

Axes can be very specialized, and a splitting axe is not a felling axe which is not a limbing axes.

Excellent information on axes and axe use can also be found in the book [Bush Craft: Outdoor Skills and Wilderness Survival](#). (as well as a good chapter on fixed blades too).

Saws



An alternative to felling tools are the saws. A saw allows a lot of duties to be performed, from felling a tree to limbing it. A saw is generally much lighter than an axe. Saws compete with axes and hatchets, not really with machetes and bush cleaning tools. All kind of saw exists, from large frame saws, handle saws, wire saws à la SAS survival, hand chain saws, copied on what exists on motorized chain saws, and optimised for hand work... Some saws can be folded in a very small volume, some cannot. Survival expert Ray Mears like to carry a frame saw blade rolled in a canteen, and make a frame for it on spot, from wild wood, but he also sometimes carry a small folding saw. [\[Saws\]](#)

Matching the tools

The set of tools one carry with him needs to be adapted to the environment he intends to spend time in, and the activity involved, and the weight he wants to transport. It also needs to be adapted to its own abilities.

For most outdoor sports, climbing, day hiking, water sports, I would not care about carrying more than a folding knife. It is obvious by example that carrying a big fixed blade, a machete or an axe while mountaineering or hiking over 2000-2400 metre, where no tree grow is a waste of weight (not counting the fact that it will make people laugh a lot).

One exception to this would be when the weight is not an issue, and the tool can have a use in case of emergency. It is clear that an axe in the car while driving in an isolated forest area is not a stupid move at all.

When the stay in the wilderness is expected to be longer than one day, or the place is really isolated, then I would consider to add a small fixed blade, which would allow to take advantage of the environment. I do not like bigger knives, because of weight and size, and because they are clumsy to use and carry, in my opinion.

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The next step(s) is (are) obviously either a machete or golok, or a hatchet or an axe, or a saw, in order to adapt to a specific environment and need.

The weight of a tool is an important consideration when one must carry it. It is also by the way important when using it. An heavy machete does not take the same toll in tiredness than a light one. It will go quicker for cutting thick and hard vegetation, and require a lot more work in lighter vegetation... Carrying a felling axe when there is no need for it may be a bit extreme, but then in some countries, your life may depend on a big axe, in order to get dry wood for fire.

I do not like the "one blade can do it all" idea, because if you can get two tools for the same weight, and efficiency, it is better for your safety, as losing one will not be such of a problem. If a knife or edged tool is important for your way of life, or even survival, then you'd better have two with you in case you lose one. Doubling essential gear when possible has saved my ass a few times (not specifically with edged tools, BTW), and I am firmly convinced of the efficiency of this principle. If you do this, it is then quite intelligent to choose complementary yet slightly overlapping edged tools, like a small fixed blade and an axe, or a small fixed blade and a machete, or a pocket knife and a fixed blade, rather than one and only one big bulk of hollow handle "survival knife" which will not do any task very well.

The machete type tools are rather good for path making or place clearing, and in places where a dense and intricate vegetation can be found. It is still rather a tropical or bush tool. *(amazingly, what they are designed for by different ethnical groups, whether africans, americans, asian or europeans, — the other use has come into desuetude since Rwanda, hopefully!).*

The axe is rather adapted for felling trees for fire, and making shelter, such are saws too. These are forestry tools *(amazingly, what they were designed for!, as the other use has come into desuetude since the Vikings).*

The saws are excellent for people that fear heavy edged tools or cannot handle them safely. Children do well with saws and in a relatively much more secure way than with an axe or a machete ! Certainly chopping tools are more ego-satisfying, but saws are often more efficient in terms of energy needed to perform the same task.

Of course all these tools need to be maintained to a sharp state. But a sharp state is not enough to reach optimum performance. The profile is terribly important for wood cutting tools, and maintaining a good profile eases works a lot. [[Sharpening](#)]

A good tool does not need to be expensive. Take a great care about manufacturers that tell that their tools will withstand more abuse than others can, they are generally lies, or cunning advertisements. Some cheap tools can do a lot more than some very expensive ones. Some inexpensive high quality tools: Swiss knives (the smaller ones), Opinel, Mora knives from KJ Eriksson or Frosts of Sweden, Valiant Survival Goloks, Machetes from Tramontina, A lot of axes and hatchets, depending on the country you buy them, These are much more value than the price you pay for them. This said, I am generally ready to pay more if I get better dependability, or better performance. But some prices are just out of context, paying 300\$ for a Rambo-Jumbo blade that I will hardly use from fear of damaging it, seems to me out of proportion when I can get a good work-horse between 10 and 50\$. I'll moderate this opinion by the fact that sometime material and work make the price, but the fact is that often, it is also only hype that makes the price.

Getting it

Any tool is part of a three variable equation: tool, user, function. Each has its importance in the final efficiency, and

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each one has influence on the other parameters. I mean by this that having a tool that can chop somehow can create a need to use it this way, or at least unties the the possibility, while being willing to cut high grass indeed creates the need for a tool that can do it, probably a sickle. In the middle lays the user, that is limited by it's own ideas, ways, knowledge, imagination or even fears on how to choose or use a tool in order to achieve a specific task. A good knife does not make a good user, and a good user does not make a good knife. But what must be considered as performance is the level that is made of user experience, and adequation of the tool to the task it performs. Something that smiths know, as they perceive the tool as a part of themselves, not a static object that needs to be dealt with. The only way to elevate the performance, is therefore practice. Cleverness of the user is the key, not the tool itself.

I could not go into more details without being too specific, but I hope this will help clarify a few points, and also shift a few existing paradigms back to common sense.

Post-scriptum :

Thanks to my friends for their helpful comments.

In these days of scientific progress, lots of people are trying to reinvent the wheel, or claim that science can bring better tools. I personally think that most useful hand working tools have been invented long ago, and adapted to specific needs long ago too. Some past inventions were as clumsy as some modern ones, time is not a factor of improvement, knowledge is. In our modern times, it is obvious that while we have earned a lot of knowledge about materials, a lot has been lost about cutting implements, simply because generally our lives do not depend on them anymore as often as it was the case for our ancestors.

[[Pocket Knives](#)] see also [Pocket knives](#), [Cold steel twistmaster](#), [Cheap knives and sharpener](#), [Pocket Multi-Tools](#)

[[Knives](#)] [See also [Fixed Blades](#), [Finnish leuku](#), [Mora Knives with Synthetic Handles](#), [Frosts mora clipper](#), [Mora and other Scandinavian knives](#), [Cold steel twistmaster](#), [Roselli Carpenter UHC](#), [Horn Golok Small](#)

[[Big blades](#)] See also [Goloks](#), [Khukuris](#), [Machetes](#), [Parang](#), [Large Bolo Camp](#), [Horn Golok Large](#), [ColdSteel LTC Kukri](#), [Golok Kelapa](#) , [Parang Lading and Klewang Sumbawa](#), [Valiant Company Survival Golok](#), [Chiruwa Angh Kholo Khukuri](#), [Tramontina Machete](#), [Barteaux machete](#), [Goloks](#), [Banana tree VS Valiant blades](#), [Valiant Golok Hitam](#)

[[Hatchets](#)] see also [Axes and Hatchets](#), [Hatchets](#), [Hatchets continued \(2\)](#), [Hatchets continued \(3\)](#), [Hatchets continued \(4\)](#), [Gransfors hatchet](#), [Light Weight Hatchet](#), [Axes and hatchets](#)

[[Axes](#)] also check [Axes and Hatchets](#), [How to assess and fix an axe](#), [Advanced axe selection](#), [An Ilitis Axe](#)

[[Saws](#)] also check [Saws](#), [Saws for the Outdoors](#), [Sawvivor](#), [Gardener's Saw](#)

[[Sharpening](#)] also check [Sharpening](#), [Convex Profiling and Sharpening by Hand HOW-TO](#), [Sharpening experiences](#), [Sharpening and Reprofileing Traditional Convex Blades](#) . [ColdSteel LTC Kukri](#)