

**Westford Trail Stewards  
Guidelines  
21 May 2010**

The Westford Conservation Commission has joined together with the Westford Conservation Trust to form the Land and Trails Stewardship Committee. That Committee has a Steering Committee of three members, appointed by the Commission and the Trust, and a larger number of other volunteers who help with land and trails, the Westford Trail Stewards. This document lays out the duties of the Trail Stewards.

Think of a trail steward's job as "three B's and a D" - Blowdowns, Brushing, Blazing and Drainage - plus "Other".

Blowdowns

This is the first job in the spring—clearing the winter's deposit of blowdowns. Clearing fallen trees or branches from the trail should be done before Memorial Day each year. Hand saws usually do the trick, but for a big blowdown, a chainsaw is useful. Call the Trail Crew if a blowdown is too big to handle or just to get some help and someone with a chainsaw. Be especially careful with any big "leaners"; these can exhibit dangerous dynamics after cutting.

Brushing

The most important trail maintenance job is clearing the brush. Without regular clearing, even frequently used trails can become overgrown and difficult to pass through or follow in just 4 or 5 years. The recommended width for a cleared trail is four feet; the proper height is eight feet or as high as the steward can reach. Tools for clearing are hand clippers, weeders (swizzles), pruners or loppers, and bow saws.

Low shrubs and young trees should be cut close to the ground for aesthetic reasons, to prevent tripping, and to keep stumps from sprouting. Avoid leaving potentially dangerous pointed stumps. This low growth should be removed back to the outside edge of the cleared trail.

If a short treetop has to be removed, it is generally better to remove the whole tree since removal of the terminal bud will aggravate lateral growth into the trail and leave an unsightly tree.

A good clearing job can be nullified if all branches and debris are not removed from the trail. Pick up all branches, trees, and debris, and scatter them off the trail. Downed trees are best dragged butt first until the top is completely off the trail. Large limbs and small trees can be thrown clear of the trail, provided that they do not hang in the branches or shrubs next to the trail.

## Blazing

Most Westford trails are paint blazed. The standard paint blaze is a rectangular 2"x 6" vertical blaze. Colors follow no particular rule, but yellow and light blue are commonly used and easy to see. Durable outdoor latex paint purchased locally is adequate and easy to procure. Surveyor's boundary paint is ideal if available.

Cleaning the bark of a tree before painting helps the blaze adhere and last a long time. Use a nylon dish scrub pad or wire brush. Sometimes rubbing with a leather glove is adequate for a really smooth bark. Be careful to not scrub too deep; this opens up sap seeps that negatively affect the paint blaze.

Disposable paint brushes about 1 1/2" to 2" wide are favorites. Using a squeeze type ketchup bottle for paint is useful and avoids spilling. Just squeeze out enough on the brush for one blaze and paint away.

On trees, place blazes about head height, 6 to 7 feet. Avoid placing blazes on dead trees as they are apt to blow down and the blazes will be lost. Blaze only where you want people to walk, every 100 feet or so. At corners where the trail turns significantly, place two blazes one over the other, with the top blaze offset in the direction of the turn. This is the standard sign for hikers to proceed cautiously keeping aware of where the trail goes. After a turn, a visible blaze is useful, even if closer than the standard 100 feet. The basic rule is that someone unfamiliar with the trail should be able to see a blaze ahead on a more or less continuous basis. This is especially true where the trail is not heavily used and visible.

Blaze a trail in one direction and then the other. Pick out the trees and rocks most visible to hikers going in each direction. Blazing the front and back of the same tree is generally not good, unless the tree has good sight lines from 100 feet in both directions.

If you make a mistake in your blaze painting, carry a spray can of camouflage color paint to spray over the mistake.

## Drainage

Cleaning out drainage on and near trails is a very important maintenance job. If drainage is not cleared, severe erosion may result, especially on slopes where the trail can attract water much like a stream bed. Cleaning drainage is both a spring and fall job. Most important is the fall after leaves are down. Fallen leaves clog up streams and drainage dips easily; cleaning up before the winter/spring run offs can help a lot. Tools are a rake or hoe. Use them to pull soil and duff up on the sides of the drainage to build up berms directing water off the trail. Cleaning streams of branches, leaves and soil buildup keeps the water flowing across the trail and minimizes the step sizes needed for hikers to cross the stream. When placing step stones, leave adequate spacing to allow free flow of water and to avoid catching branches and leaves.

## Other

The Westford Trail Steward should be on the lookout for other things that affect the trail.

Litter is always showing up, so most stewards carry a plastic shopping bag to pick up all forms of litter. Big dump sites can be reported to the Steering Committee for a project approach and possible signing.

Report any signage problems; either broken or destroyed signs or just a place where you feel a sign would be very useful. Broken bridges, significant erosion, or neighbor issues should also be reported to the Steering Committee.

## Talking with local residents

Good communication with residents, especially property owners and neighbors, is critical for creating and maintaining positive and effective relationships. Without this, resistance to trail steward efforts can develop.

When planning a trail activity, determine the amount of change to the area. If the work will be more than minor routine maintenance of an existing trail, confer with the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee will notify residents of planned work.

If stewards are approached by a local resident while working on a trail, they should stop work and talk politely with the resident; giving an explanation of what is happening and why. If the resident challenges the location of a boundary or the authorization to work in that area, then the steward should explain that the Trail Steering Committee will be informed and the Trust Board of Directors and/or Conservation Commission will take any necessary action. Then the steward should stop working in the area and leave. The next step is to notify the Steering Committee as well as the President of the Trust and/or the Conservation Commission, depending on which has custody of the piece of land.

## Follow Up

When you have completed a trail maintenance day, send an email or letter to your stewardship leader reporting your work and issues.

Thanks for your volunteers efforts!!

Westford Land and Trail Committee

Steering Committee:

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