

Adventurer's MK

Axemanship

Choosing an axe

The first step in learning to use an axe is to choose one that fits the purpose of use. Each axe is designed to do a different job and should only be used for their intended purpose. It should never be used to do the job more suited to another type of axe, saw, knife, mallet, hammer and so on. It is also important that the correct size and weight of axe is chosen. It is difficult (and dangerous) to try and control one of an inappropriate size.

There are several different varieties;

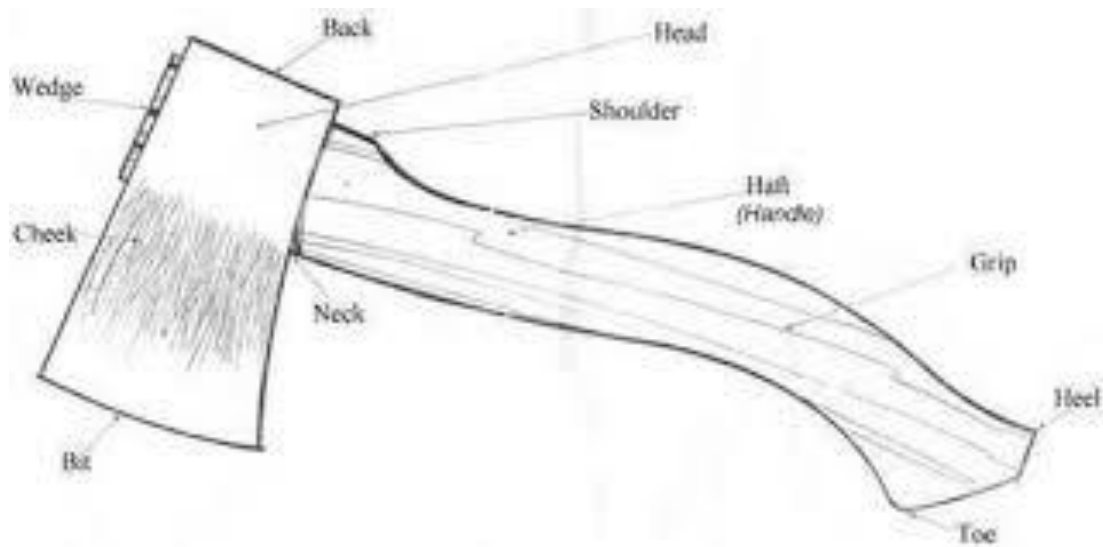
Hatchet or hand axe - For use with one hand. Hand-axes may have either wooden or metal hafts. Those with metal hafts are one-piece and have a rubber handle around the grip. It is used to cut and trim small firewood, thin branches and twigs. Any wood larger than three inches in diameter (about the size of your wrist) should be cut using a bow saw.

Felling Axe - A single-bitted axe weighing about three pounds, with a thirty-inch handle. This is for use with both hands; it is larger than the hand-axe and is used for felling upright, live trees. No one should attempt to use a felling axe until they are competent with a hand axe.

Much heavier axes are meant for heavy-duty wood chopping and little else.

Two bitted axes - ones with two blades are loggers' axes.

Identifying parts of an axe



Care of the axe

Mask the axe when not in use, using a correctly fitting mask and not by sticking it in the ground. An axe may be masked temporarily in the chopping block but make sure that the blade follows the grain of the wood, is secure in the wood, and that the haft is not overhanging the block and can trip anyone. Keep all axes dry. **Never leave them out overnight.** Keep the axe head greased to prevent it rusting and oil a wooden handle regularly with linseed oil.

Safety Check

Before using an axe, sight along the blade to make sure that the handle is not warped or that the blade is not set off too much from the centre line of the handle. Make sure that the head is attached securely to the handle by being firmly wedged. Look the handle over carefully. Make sure that the grain runs parallel to the sides, and does not have any splints, cracks or chunks taken out of the handle. Remember, an axe will last a lifetime if you take care of it.

Sharpening the axe

Every axe should have a leather sheath for the head, not only for safety, but to prevent nicks on the cutting edge. Most axes, when they are bought, have too thick a blade and the cutting edge has too quick a taper to cut well. It should be ground down a little. An axe can be sharpened with a fine file. Then switch to a coarse stone and finish sharpening with a medium stone. The best stone for axe-sharpening is a round one. It has no sharp edges to rub through a packsack, so you can carry it with you whenever you take the axe. An axe should never be left lying around. It can cause accidents or accidents can happen to it. Keep it hung in its sheath or sink the blade into the top of a stump.

Cutting with a Hand axe

Always use a chopping block below the wood to be chopped and don't let the axe go into the ground; Chop directly over the chopping block. The part to be cut should be resting on the block.

Procedure

1. Crouch (or kneel on one knee) behind the chopping block.
2. Hold the wood to be chopped with one hand.
3. With the other hand grip the hand-axe on the lower part of the haft, on the 'grip'. Hold the axe firmly but not rigidly. Note: only hold the hand-axe with one hand.
4. Chop the wood by keeping the axe and the lower part of the arm straight and bending your arm at the elbow rather than the wrist or shoulder. Chop at 45 degree angles to the length of the wood making alternate left and right cuts to create a small 'V'. The 'V' will get wider as you cut through the wood, creating the chippings, until it is cut in half. Do not try to cut at right angles to the length of the wood; this will make the axe bounce.
5. Always watch the point at which you are aiming. Indeed, when practising, it is a good idea to put a chalk mark on the log and try to hit that.
6. Clear chippings away regularly and use them for kindling (that is, small pieces of wood suitable for starting a fire).

Cutting with a Felling axe

The best wood is a dead, standing tree. It is dry - seasoned - and will burn well. Dead trees and branches lying on the ground are generally damp and make smoky fires. First, walk around the tree to determine which way it leans. That is the direction you want to drop it, because it is easier. If there is a standing tree in that direction that might hang it up, then plan to drop it slightly to one side. Consider also the direction of the wind. It is much easier to drop a tree with the wind than into the wind. Never fell a tree in strong winds.

Safety First

As with any cutting tool, a safety circle needs to be created. However, an axe's safety circle requires a much greater distance due to the potential injury caused by flying chippings. That distance should be no less than 2metres from each side.

Before starting, make sure that there are no branches, small saplings, or brush within reach of your axe. They could deflect your axe and cause an accident. The secret in cutting with an axe lies in the grip. Grasp the helve - the old term for the handle - with both hands close together near the butt.

Touch the blade of the axe to the tree to get the right distance. As you raise the axe over your right shoulder, slide your right hand up (providing you are right-handed) about three-quarters of the way towards the head of the axe. As you bring the axe down, slide your right hand down the handle until it touches your left hand. Strike so that the blade cuts into the tree at about a forty-five degree angle to the grain. Don't attempt to put excessive force into the swing. You cannot get any accuracy this way. The fastest chopping is achieved with many fast and accurate blows, not with brute force. The first notch is made near the bottom of the tree on the side on which you want the tree to drop. Make the notch about half way through. A good rule of thumb is to make the notch as wide as the diameter of the tree that you are cutting.

Your next notch should be a few (three or four) inches above the first one and directly opposite it. When the tree begins to fall, step away to one side of the cut, not behind it. Should the top branches of the falling tree catch on another tree, the butt may snap and fly backwards several feet. Many injuries have been caused by backward-flying butts.

The next task is to limb the tree. Stand on the opposite side of the tree from which you want to remove the limbs. In this way, if the axe glances off the tree it will glance away from your legs. Work from the butt to the top, chopping at the bottom side of the branches. Limbing goes fastest this way, and it is easier to make the cuts flush with the trunk. The next step is to cut off the crown. On small trees, this can be done with one notch all the way through. Bigger trees may require two notches, opposite one another, with each going half way.

To cut the trunk into usable lengths, simply chop two notches half way through the trunk on opposite sides of each other as before. This is easier than using one deep notch from the top down. You should always stand on the trunk with your feet spread wide and chop between your feet. To split these pieces, use the butt section as a chopping block. Lean the chunk to be split against your chopping block and strike a good hard blow on the upper end where the piece is resting. If the halves are still too large, split these the same way into quarters. Don't neglect the larger branches for firewood. Cut these into desired lengths by holding them across the chopping block with one hand and striking them at a slight angle with the axe. The chop should be delivered at the centre of your chopping block where the branch is firmly supported. To chop up kindling, always lay the piece to be kindled horizontally across the chopping block, grasp it at the lower end, and strike the top. Once the axe is embedded in the piece, you can slam it down vertically to complete the cut. Never hold the piece to be kindled upright with one hand and chop with the other. That is an easy way to cut off your hand.