

# Why everyone should own a Scythe

Contributed by Deanom

A fascinating and thorough look at the practical benefits of the ownership and use of a scythe

## Disclaimer

Before I get into the main body of this article, I would like to make a few things clear. Firstly, I do not sell scythes, scything equipment or tuition, and stand to make no profit from encouraging the use of scythes. Secondly, this is not a "How To" article, it is a "why" article. There are some very good sources of information for anybody wanting technical help, and I will mention them at the end of the article.

There are potentially some disadvantages to using a scythe, or situations where it might not be the most efficient tool for a particular job. In the interests of balance, I will cover them here.

## Speed

Whilst a scythe is faster at cutting weeds than a strimmer, for cutting grass, it is slower than a tractor, or a lawnmower. Therefore for cutting larger areas (1 acre plus), or where speed is important, a scythe is probably best kept as a back-up for cases of mechanical failure. It should still be the tool of choice for those who do not want to use fossil fuels, unless horse drawn equipment is used.

## Effort

Using a scythe requires physical effort. If you are unable to walk unaided, or have a severe physical disability, you would probably not be capable of using a scythe. For the rest of us, expending energy may, or may not, be seen as a disadvantage. I personally struggle to balance calories in with calories out, so anything which helps me to burn off the surplus is a good thing.

## Hay/Grass

When using machinery to cut grass for hay, the final product comes neatly packaged in bales. These are easy to store. In a similar way, when cutting grass with a lawnmower, the grass is either mulched and returned to the soil, or collected in some way for you to dispose of. When using a scythe, the hay has to be stacked loose in a rack, which can be difficult to make, or find room for. When cutting the lawn, the cuttings need to be raked up and disposed of.

These are the three main disadvantages that I see to using a scythe. There may be others that you can think of. Please feel free to reply to the article.

## The Benefits

### Practical Benefits

### Versatility

The scythe can perform many functions, each of which would normally require a different machine, or attachment for a machine. It can cut your lawn, replacing a lawnmower. It can get rid of your weeds, replacing a strimmer. It can cut grass for hay replacing a tractor and cutter. It can cut grain crops for harvesting. It can also be used very effectively for topping paddocks etc.

### Accessibility

The scythe can be used in places that would be difficult for a tractor to get to. Not only does this include the obvious ones, like slopes, orchards, banks, ditches, etc. but also normal ground that is still too wet for machinery. This is particularly useful if you want to take an early cut of hay. Here the grass is at it's best in mid May, but in some years the ground is too wet (clay) for a tractor that early in the year. A scythe is lighter than a strimmer, and doesn't need to have fuel, or protective gear carried around with it, or worn. This makes it ideal for cutting areas of grass, weeds, or bracken, away from your house, or vehicle.

### Quality

Hay cut by hand can be of a far higher quality than machine cut hay. The grass is cut once, not spun round by a mechanical cutting blade. The turning is done with a pitchfork, which causes less damage to the stems, and loses less leaf. Turning with a machine really thrashes the hell out of the grass, and at the same time, raises lots of dust, which ends up all over the grass, and is then packed into the bales. The same argument could be used for harvesting grain, particularly if the straw was to be used for building/thatching. In addition to the quality of the hay, the meadow itself is left in a better condition. The blades of grass are less "flayed", and the cleaner cut allows it to recover more quickly. The soil surface is also maintained in a better condition, as using machinery can involve having a tractor on the land six times. The damage is worse on smaller fields, and on the margins, as there is more need for the tractor to turn than on larger fields, and in the central areas of a field. Even somebody as rotund as me is unlikely to compact the soil to the same extent as a tractor.

### Reliability

A scythe has no mechanical parts to go wrong. Damage to the blade is repaired with simple hand tools, most of which can be carried on the body. The scythe only needs a light oiling of the blade and snath after use, to stay in good condition.

### Pollution

Hopefully does not need elaborating, although the noise pollution might not be so obvious.

### Economic Benefits

#### Affordability

A scythe, complete with everything that you need to get started, can be bought for under £100. A better set costs £132, including postage and packaging. Compared to the cost of a petrol strimmer, or a lawnmower, this is a significant saving. Balance it against both machines together, and it is a very affordable option. Even an old tractor is a big outlay. Add in the cost of the implements that you need, and it makes owning a tractor for smaller holdings uneconomical. The initial outlay is only the beginning. Add in fuel, lubricants, spares, servicing etc. and the running costs of these machines soon add up. In comparison, the scythe costs virtually nothing to maintain.

#### Self Reliance

For somebody with an area of grass too small to justify owning a tractor, hay making puts you at the mercy of somebody else. They will come after they have done their own fields, not always at the ideal time. The scythe allows you to cut when it suits you. Using the scythe also allows you to "harvest" areas of grass not normally cut with a tractor, such as the base of hedges, borders of the property, orchards, plantations of young trees, banks, ditches etc. These are normally wasted. They also tend to have a greater variety of plants in them, adding variety to the hay. Not all of these areas need to be owned by you. The verges of lanes/roads that are lightly used by traffic, could all provide you with a source of food for your animals, or compost heap, or mulch material. I don't know whether "guerrilla scything" will take off, but it would allow you to make use of a resource which is normally regarded as a waste product, or chore.

#### Craftsmen

The continental scythes are made by skilled craftsmen. If demand for them falls, then another skill will be lost, which may not be capable of being revived at a later date.

### Social Benefits

#### Companionship

A group of people, all using strimmers, cannot talk, laugh, or communicate through all of the noise, and protective equipment. In my village, two of us keep the weeds in the churchyard trimmed. With strimmers, it is a noisy, smelly, isolated task, but now that both of us have scythes, we can chat away whilst we work. It is a much more sociable event, and always invites some repartee with casual observers (only the living so far!).

#### Teamwork

Haymaking by machine is a solitary task, until such time as the bales need to be moved. In contrast, hay making by hand is a communal task, where all of the family can take part. You can mow in teams, making the job much easier, and more fun. The freshly cut grass can be spread by children, and turning can be done by anybody. Where the climate allows, haymaking can be a shared task, cutting on one property, followed by another. This may be more difficult in wetter places, as the "windows" for making hay will be smaller, and less frequent.

### Spiritual Benefits

#### Meditation

Like many repetitive tasks, once mastered, scything allows your mind to wander. If you concentrate on the rhythm, and breath in time with the cutting strokes, it is possible to start losing track of time. Sadly, anything which breaks your rhythm returns you to the present, but for periods of time you can almost recharge your own batteries whilst you work.

#### Health

Using a scythe has a number of benefits. The exercise itself is a good way of improving fitness. It burns calories, and as cutting grass is far easier early in the day, if done before eating, you get to burn fat as fuel quicker than after eating (lower blood sugar levels). It is a fairly gentle, aerobic exercise, which if done correctly, should not cause pain or injury. The twisting action does help some conditions. I have suffered from lower back pain, but mowing reduces the discomfort, and keeps me a bit more supple. Having said that, if the scythe is not sharp enough, or when cutting is difficult, it can become hard work. I tend to go down a trouser size once I start cutting grass in May.

#### History

When scything, I feel a link with the past, and with the land, that I don't get from using a machine. I feel that I am doing something that others have done before me for generations.

### Respect for Nature

Using a scythe to mow doesn't feel like exploiting nature. It leaves me feeling a greater connection with the land that I currently have the privilege of living on. I feel part of it. I cause less damage to the animals that I share the land with, and on the rare occasion that one of them is cut by the blade, I have the opportunity to see how bad the damage is, and act accordingly. By contrast, when I have used a tractor, nothing seems to survive, and I have no way of avoiding the wildlife. There is certainly nothing left afterwards. I also feel like I am another industrial worker, only my factory is outdoors. The machines just seem too violent.

### Survival Benefits

#### Peak Oil

I like to work on the basis of Pessimistic Optimism. This means that I tend to hope for the best, but plan for the worst. If those who believe that our society is heading for a meltdown are right, being in a position to overwinter animals, by hay making, might be the difference between living and starving. Therefore, for those already convinced that Peak Oil is coming soon, a scythe will be an essential survival tool. For the rest, it seems foolish not to hedge your bets. Once it happens, it may be too late to get hold of one.

#### In Conclusion

For many tasks the scythe is the best tool for the job. Even if you are addicted to your petrol guzzling, fume spewing machines, or you think that the machine is more efficient, why not get yourself a scythe for the little jobs, the corners and edges, and for the days when you need to get things done, but still feel the need for some peace and quiet. I think that you'll be surprised at how easy, and how much fun it is.

#### Happy Mowing

Dean Martin (Scything Anorak)

#### Further Information

The best practical guide to Scything is "The Scythe Book", by David Tresemer. This can be bought from The Earth Repair Catalogue ([www.permaculture.co.uk](http://www.permaculture.co.uk)), or from The Scythe Shop ([www.thescytheshop.co.uk](http://www.thescytheshop.co.uk)). Please note that if you buy a second hand copy, you need to ensure that you get the Second edition, which contains an addendum by Peter Vido. Peter is the Master Yoda of Scything. It is possible to teach yourself how to use the scythe well, with only this book to help.

There have been articles published in Permaculture magazine (issue 39) and Country Smallholding magazine (May 2005).

The Scythe shop has some good information on the use of the scythe, sharpening etc. It also has links to Peter Vido's own site ([www.scytheconnection.com](http://www.scytheconnection.com)). For those of you with a decent computer, and a broadband connection, this site has video to help you with technique. Sadly, my own system is so old that I cannot comment on the content, as I cannot watch it.

#### Purchasing Scythes

Good quality scythes can be bought from the Scythe Shop , and The Earth Repair Catalogue (see above). Please note that when buying a complete set, the Scythe Shop includes a copy of the book, whereas the catalogue doesn't, and charges £3 more.

Scythes are also advertised by Ascott Smallholding Supplies, and others. I cannot say if the quality is the same. Ascott told me that their scythes were German, but couldn't name the manufacturer. As some of the mass produced, Chinese Scythes are printed in German, I personally was unwilling to buy one. As they are charging the same sort of money as the scythe shop, it seems safer to stick with the two above.

#### Help

Anybody who would like to know more about scything is welcome to comment in one of the forums, or to PM me.