

A Chainsaw Journey by Charlie Beck

Over the years I concluded that a chainsaw is an integral tool for maintaining the garden. I am a fan of lopping shears. They are a timesaver when cutting small to medium woody branches and palm fronds, but lopping shears cannot cut large palm fronds like those of *Attalea* or *Borassus*, or prune large woody branches. I've tried using battery operated reciprocating and circular saws, but they just can't measure up to using a chainsaw. I'll share my quest to find a reliable, easy to use, chainsaw which meets most garden maintenance requirements.

In 1993 we purchased acreage which has become our palm garden. Back then it was mostly an open field, but it did have several category 1, invasive, exotic trees such as earleaf acacia and maleleuca. All of these trees had to be removed prior to building our home. At that point I had no experience cutting down trees. We were lucky that all of the invasive exotics were located in areas void of desirable plants. This gave me a chance to learn how to use my newly acquired chainsaw.

I bought a gas powered Craftsman model. It seemed to do the job but, like most inexpensive 2 cycle garden tools, it soon required service beyond spark plug replacement and carburetor adjustment. It seemed service centers felt that it made sense to replace the chain saw rather than have it serviced. I repeated this process a few times and then decided to upgrade to a Stihl chainsaw.

My experience with the Stihl chainsaw was similar to the Craftsman model. I didn't notice much of an improvement in performance or durability. When you use a chainsaw as seldom as I did, they are usually difficult to start and if you turn it off it might not restart at all. Now there might have been minor adjustments which could have improved performance, but I wasn't inclined to take the chainsaw to a repair shop. I made adjustments per owner manual directions and made do with how it ran. I typically walked around the garden pruning and cutting as I went. I let the chainsaw idle between cuts. I usually continued the process until the chainsaw ran out of gas so not to foul the carburetor with stale gas.

Sharpening the chain is another issue. Chains do become dull and it's best to have several spare chains on hand. I usually accumulated four or five dull chains before I trekked to the saw sharpening service center. Of course a return trip was required to pick up the sharpened chains. I never tried to sharpen the chains myself. I didn't feel that the time required to sharpen them myself was worth the cost of having them professionally sharpened.

One day we were watching the PBS show, *This Old House*. Roger Cook used a chainsaw and showed the viewers a new way to sharpen a chain. He showed a nifty sharpening device which clamped onto the guide bar. Once this sharpener was snapped in

place you could sharpen the chain while you ran the saw and applied pressure to the end of the guide bar. Sparks flew out of the sharpener and then the chain was razor sharp. Wow, this device would eliminate disassembly and reassembly. It would eliminate treks to the saw sharpener and the cost of sharpening. I had to try this gadget. This sharpener was the Oregon PowerSharp sharpener. The one thing Roger Cook didn't say was that you need to replace the guide bar and the chain with ones specifically designed for use with the sharpener. The price of the new guide bar, chain and sharpener would surely be recouped by not needing to travel to the service center and paying for chain sharpening. I bought a new guide bar and chain for my Stihl chainsaw. I was really impressed with how this product could sharpen the chain without disassembly. You can sharpen the chain 4 or 5 times before replacement is necessary. Now that chain sharpening was no longer time consuming and expensive, I needed to find a chainsaw with an easy start, reliable motor.

The next chainsaw I tried for light pruning was the 18V battery powered Ryobi model which used the same battery as my portable drill. I was really disappointed by this lightweight contender. It came with a 10 inch bar which meant that the short chain would need sharpening more often. There was no Oregon sharpener available for this Ryobi model so I would have to go back to getting the chain professionally sharpened. This unit was grossly underpowered, but the worst thing about this chainsaw was that the chain oiler was not automatic. You had to press on a bulb while running the saw to lubricate the chain. If this worked properly this saw might have been barely acceptable, but the oil reservoir tended to leak so when you needed oil, the reservoir was empty. I soon retired this failed product.

Next on the scene was Oregon PowerNow 40V Chainsaw. Being battery powered you could shut it off between cuts without fear of it not restarting. If the automatic chain oiler actually worked and the electric motor provided adequate power (unlike the 18V Ryobi model) it might be the perfect chainsaw for garden maintenance. Did I mention that this 14 inch chainsaw has a sharpener built into the unit? All you need to do is press on a lever to sharpen the chain. It requires no gas, no pull cords and is relatively quiet. As long as the battery is charged it starts every time and there is no battery fade. You can buy it with a standard or a high capacity lithium-ion battery. I bought the high capacity battery and it's advertised to run for 45 minutes between recharges. It takes about 2 hours to charge. The battery comes with a built in charge indicator. You push a button on the battery and it lets you know how much charge is left. Now don't expect this unit to have the power of gas

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

engine models. If I were cutting down a large pine tree, I would still use the Stihl. But for most tasks in the garden this is the perfect chainsaw. I can't remember the last time I fired up the Stihl. Oregon has a display video on their website if you want to see this saw in action. I see Ryobi and Stihl are now marketing 40V and 36V chainsaws, but they don't have a built in chain sharpener. I couldn't be more pleased with my Oregon PowerNow chainsaw.

(See photos on right.)

