



Midwest Clearcut Land Services

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A PROPERTY OWNER'S GUIDE

5 Steps to Consider Before Clearing Your Land

What to think through before you bring in equipment — for property owners in Northern Illinois & Southern Wisconsin.

Midwest Clearcut Land Services

WISCONSIN & ILLINOIS LAND MANAGEMENT

STEP ONE

What Is Your Desired Outcome or Vision for the Land?

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Before any equipment touches your property, get clear on what you actually want the finished space to look like and be used for. This single question shapes every decision that follows — which trees stay, which clearing method fits, and how completely the ground needs to be cleared.

ASK YOURSELF

- Are you clearing to prepare a building pad or lot for construction?
- Are you reclaiming overgrown ground for pasture or agricultural use?
- Are you opening up land for hunting, trails, or recreational use?
- Do you want a fully bare, buildable lot — or a natural, mulched finish?
- Is this a one-time project, or the first phase of an ongoing land management plan?

Why this comes first: A contractor walking your property with a clear goal in mind will make very different recommendations than one working without direction. Knowing your vision up front saves time, money, and avoids clearing more (or less) than you actually need.

STEP TWO

Understand Your Terrain and Soil Type

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Southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois sit across a patchwork of glacially-shaped soils. Knowing which type you're working with helps set realistic expectations for equipment access, ground conditions, and what the land will support afterward.

Mollisols — Prairie Soils

Dark, nutrient-rich topsoil formed under centuries of prairie grass. Common across the flatter, historically prairie-influenced parts of the region. Excellent for post-clearing pasture or agricultural use, though it can still turn soft and heavy when wet.

Alfisols — Forested Soils

The classic soil beneath the oak-hickory woodlands that cover much of this region. Moderately fertile with a clay-enriched subsoil layer — it supports vegetation well, but compacts easily under heavy equipment when saturated.

Outwash Soils

Sandy, gravelly ground left behind by melting glaciers, found in river valleys and along moraine edges throughout the region. Drains quickly and holds up firmer under equipment even in wetter seasons, though it supports less nutrient-rich growth afterward.

Why this matters: Soil type directly affects which equipment can access your site, when it can safely get there, and what the ground will look and behave like once clearing is finished.

STEP THREE

Identify the Vegetation You're Working With

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This region has a very specific vegetation profile, and telling the difference between what should go and what's worth keeping changes the entire approach to a project.

Invasive Brush

Buckthorn and honeysuckle dominate overgrown lots throughout this region. Both regrow aggressively from the root if simply cut back, so full removal — not just trimming — is usually the right call.

Mature Native Hardwoods

Oak, hickory, and black walnut are common throughout southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois woodlands, and are usually worth preserving and building a clearing plan around rather than removing outright.

A good walkthrough matters: Before clearing begins, a contractor should walk the property with you to flag which vegetation is invasive, which is healthy and worth keeping, and how that shapes the plan.

Common Invasive Underbrush in the Midwest

These six species show up again and again on properties across Wisconsin and Illinois. Most were originally planted as ornamentals or wildlife cover and have since spread aggressively, crowding out native plants and reducing the health of the land.

Japanese Barberry

Berberis thunbergii

Dense, spiny shrub with reddish stems and small oval leaves that turn red in fall. Bright red berries persist into winter. Thorny growth is avoided by deer, giving it a competitive edge, and dense stands create ideal habitat for ticks.

Winged Burning Bush

Euonymus alatus

Recognizable by the corky "wings" running along its stems and brilliant red fall foliage. Forms dense thickets where almost nothing else can grow underneath except its own seedlings.

Multiflora Rose

Rosa multiflora

Sprawling, thorny shrub with arching canes and clusters of small white flowers. Fringed stipules at the leaf base help distinguish it from native roses. Forms impenetrable thickets that spread quickly.

Autumn Olive

Elaeagnus umbellata

Large shrub with silvery undersides on its leaves and speckled red berries in fall. Fixes its own nitrogen in poor soil, giving it a major advantage over native plants in disturbed or low-quality ground.

Bush Honeysuckles

Lonicera spp.

Upright shrubs with hollow stems and red or orange berries. Leaf out earlier in spring and hold their leaves later in fall than native plants, giving them a longer growing season and a visible head start each year.

Glossy Buckthorn

Frangula alnus

Smooth-edged, glossy oval leaves and dark purple-to-black berries. Often found in wetter areas and woodland edges. Regrows aggressively from the root if only cut back, not removed.

Why full removal matters: Nearly all of these species regrow from root fragments left in the ground. Cutting back the visible growth without removing the root system usually means it comes back within a season or two.

STEP FOUR

Check Permits and Regulations

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Permit requirements vary by county and by proximity to water, so this step deserves real attention before equipment shows up. This is general information, not legal advice — always confirm specifics with your local zoning office.

Wisconsin

The DNR regulates wetland impacts statewide, and most southern Wisconsin counties enforce shoreland and floodplain zoning within a set distance of navigable streams, rivers, and lakes — commonly 300 feet from streams and 1,000 feet from lakes. Grading and mechanized clearing within that zone typically requires a permit.

Illinois

Northern Illinois counties enforce their own tree preservation ordinances. McHenry County requires permits for protected species like oaks, while Lake County requires permits for heritage trees (25"+ diameter), trees on bluffs or ravines, and trees within conservation easements. Rules differ meaningfully county to county.

The federal layer: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has jurisdiction over any land-disturbing activity that could impact wetlands or other regulated waters, regardless of state.

STEP FIVE

Choose the Right Clearing Method and Timing

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The end goal from Step One should drive the method — not the other way around. And once the method is chosen, timing it to the season makes a real difference in this region's soil conditions.

Land Clearing

Full removal of trees, stumps, and brush down to bare, build-ready ground. Best fit for construction prep or lots that need a completely clean start.

Forestry Mulching

Grinds brush and small trees into mulch left on-site. A natural-looking, erosion-resistant finish suited to trails, hunting land, or recreational property.

Brush Hogging

Lighter maintenance clearing for overgrowth that hasn't gotten fully out of hand — keeps land visible, safe, and easy to maintain going forward.

On timing: Frozen ground in winter lets heavy equipment access clay-heavy Alfisol and Mollisol sites without rutting the soil. Spring thaw is the toughest window regionwide, while late summer and fall work well once the ground has had time to dry.

Ready to See What Your Land Could Look Like?

Get a free, no-obligation quote from Midwest Clearcut Land Services.

Call or Text: 262.383.4994



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This guide is intended for general educational purposes and does not constitute legal, regulatory, or engineering advice. Permit and zoning requirements vary by county and property and should be confirmed directly with your local zoning authority before beginning any land clearing project.