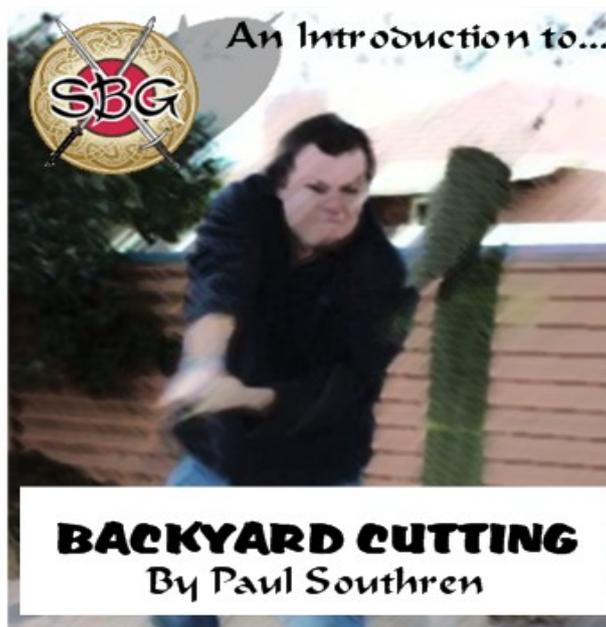


An Introduction to:

Backyard Cutting



By Paul Southren

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Introduction

SO, WHAT IS BACKYARD CUTTING?



With the resurgence of interest in collecting swords (both Eastern and Western) and the ease of buying sharp and fully functional swords on the internet, its no secret that there is a growing number of people with an interest in ‘cutting stuff up’ in the backyard... :-)

From what I jokingly refer to as doing the old nutty ‘Samurai Gardening Services’ pruning job to simply chopping up the box your new sword came in, it’s a fun (if slightly wacky) hobby thousands of people across the world enjoy. So much so that there are actually semi-organized and safety conscious ‘cutting parties’ where a small group of people bring along their sharp pointy things to a friends house, chop some stuff up—and then sit back and have a bit of a yarn over a good barbeque and some beers (and *strictly* in that order!).

While it’s all a great load of fun, before we get too carried away there are some pretty important basic safety considerations to take into account before you even think of reaching for that terrified soda bottle...

SAFETY FIRST

I’ve often heard it said that anyone considering test cutting should learn some basic firearms training as the principals are very much the same: everyone should be well behind the ‘firing line’ and to basically treat the sword as a loaded gun (that’s loaded all the time).

So here’s a few basic rules to live by:

- Don’t cut in areas people might wander through. Keep everyone out of the way of the arc of the sword.
- Don’t cut around your pets!
- Don’t drink before cutting (alcohol and swords don’t mix). Not even 1 drink.
- Don’t do test cutting alone...

Essentially if you think about what could go wrong beforehand (in an off the wall ‘final destination’ kind of way,- swords can sometimes do the damndest things) and do everything possible to minimize these risks, you can concentrate on having F-U-N!

READY TO CUT?!

So everyone’s behind the line, you’ve got a good sharp sword in your hand, you’re sober (they’ll be plenty of drinks to be had once those targets have been dealt with) and your ready to cut... The only question remaining now is, what are you going to cut up today? :-)

Well, I am glad you asked. Because we are now going to take a look at some common (and cheap) targets you can chop up, how to use them and what they will do to your blade...

It’s target time! :-)

TARGET #1: Water Filled Plastic Milk Jugs

Fill up a plastic milk jug with water, put it on a stand of some description and give it a go— chopping a plastic milk jug into pieces is one of the easiest targets of them all—and very forgiving on the blade to boot!

Some people like to pickle chip them— in other words try to get as many cuts out of one Jug as they possibly can, as thinly as they can. Others (like me) like to line up as many as I can and try to cut them all with one massive hit!

Whichever way you like to do them, Milk Jugs are a great, inexpensive target-though don't forget to dry your sword off thoroughly and give it a good oiling as quickly as possible afterwards and you won't have any rust problems.



YOUTUBE EXAMPLE

Like I mentioned before, my favourite way of cutting Milk Jugs is in a row.

You really can tell a lot about both your cutting technique and the sharpness of a sword by lining them up in this way. And it can be kind of spooky to see how the tops fall sometimes when you get that perfect “Zen” slice...

Click on the image to see the youtube video example – in this case with a [Cheness Cutlery Katana](#).

TARGET #2: Water Filled Soda Bottles



The skin of a soda bottle is a lot tougher to cut through than a Milk Jug and it takes a much keener blade to slice them.

It also takes a fairly quick cut because if your strike is too slow, all that happens is that you will bat them across the yard like a baseball (strike, your'e out!).The smaller the container, the harder the cut is to make as there is more pressure inside the bottle.

It should also be noted that swords with a thinner blade profile tend to cut smaller bottles easier (yet they struggle with the more advanced targets – like all things, it is a trade off).

The only downside is that because the skin of soda bottles is thicker, it may well leave small scratches on the blade, which bothers some people, but others think a sword without a few ‘battle scratches’ lacks character. It is also possible with thinner blades that if they make contact with the hard lip of the bottle, they can actually chip the blade, so they are certainly not as easy a target as they might first appear...

TARGET #3: Fruit and Veg



Yes, I kid you not—making a ‘fruit salad’ with a sword from pineapples, apples, lemons, oranges and watermelons (not to mention vegies like pumpkins) might be very messy, but it’s a real blast— especially if you stumble upon some excess fruit and veg that’s going bad (too expensive and wasteful to do on the good stuff though, which doesn’t give you a license to conveniently let food spoil in the fridge as my wife often reminds me... Hehe).

Anyway, if you decide to make a ‘fruit salad’ with your sword - bear in mind afterwards that the acidic secretions of fruits and veg can quickly ruin a blade. So be quick to give it a good wash down with soapy water, dry it off and then a spray on some WD-40 before giving it a good oiling for good measure.

SIDE NOTE:

While it sounds like fun, it’s really not a safe thing to have someone throw these things towards you and try to cut them up...

TARGET# 4: POOL NOODLES

Pool noodles are great fun! Pool noodles are also actually surprisingly difficult to cut, mostly because they are extremely lightweight and have a springy texture so that if your cut is too slow or too hard, the little so and so’s tend to just flop down out of the way and pop back up again to mock you! :-)

In fact, I’ve even heard stories of people who are quite adept at cutting traditional tatami omote mats who have had a fair bit of trouble with pool noodles. It does take a few goes before you get the hang of cutting them, and as a training tool they are a fun way of testing your cutting speed and developing good velocity.

At the end of the day - the reality is that Pool noodles also have a lot going for them.

Not only are they are fairly cheap (compared to tatami mats), readily obtainable in the summer months and dry, but they also leave no permanent marks or scratches on the blade and are a great, fun challenge to start with!



YOUTUBE EXAMPLE

While they may be tricky targets, a small army of pool noodles proved no match for by [Bujinkan Oniyuri Katana...](#)

So much so that in the end, I decided that the only way to really get any satisfaction out of cutting them was to insert a solid broomstick core.

But the Oniyuri went right through that too.

Click on the image to see the video.

TARGET #5: CARDBOARD BOXES



Some people who don't do much test cutting often have no qualms about chopping up the box it came in (after all, that's why they send you swords in a box isn't it!).

The advantages of cutting cardboard boxes is that they are relatively cheap and easy to come by. Not to mention that they are pretty easy to cut, even with a dull blade.

The disadvantage is that cardboard usually isn't just made of paper and often contains numerous other rough bits and pieces that can really scratch the surface of a blade and dull the edge in no time at all.

TARGET # 6: NEWS PAPER

There are basically two ways of using a newspaper for test cutting.

The first way is to simply get a normal newspaper, roll it up as tightly as possible, tie it up with string and soak it in a bucket of water (you might want to weigh it down with something first) until it is nice and soggy. Then let it dry a little, stick it into the upright peg on your test cutting stand (or hang it from somewhere by some string) and viola! Instant 'poor mans tatami'!!

While it is obviously very cheap, it is not a bad substitute for tatami and has a similar consistency that tends not to scratch or damage the blade, though the ink may run onto the blade and needs to be washed off pretty quickly.

The other (much, much harder way) is to do cut a single piece of news paper. You can either do this by suspending it from some pegs somewhere or freestanding (which is much, much harder and requires truly masterful technique!).

To cut the paper without tearing it, you'll need a VERY keen blade and a lightning fast cut, but it can be a lot of fun to try!

QUICK TIP:

Before cutting a box, check it for staples- otherwise you'll end up with a really nasty looking scratch!



YOUTUBE EXAMPLE

Test cutting a single piece of paper pegged to a clothesline demonstrates how well designed for the cut the differentially hardened Kaze Katana really is...

And the weird sound it made on that first cut is still something of a mystery to me.

Click on the image to see the vid.

TARGET #7: Meat

Chopping up chunks of dead animal flesh isn't for everyone—and in the name of good taste (no pun intended!) I have generally avoided using it as a test medium on my site.



But the fact of the matter is that swords were originally designed to cut human flesh and bone, so it would seem logical to assume that testing them on chunks of animal meat is (hopefully!) the closest any sword enthusiast can get to test them for their initial intended function.

Despite the obvious financial costs of buying a huge slab of meat to chop up, test cutting on meat is really quite gross and isn't something you want to really do in front of the neighbours (!)—but after you have done a few cuts, it certainly does teach you some respect for the damage potential of your sword...

And it is a very popular medium with the ARMA ([Association for Renaissance Martial Arts](#)) and in the [Cold Steel](#) promos to name a few.

Out of respect for the poor pig or cow meat that you have chopped, it is probably respectful to BBQ it after you have finished hacking it up. With this in mind, it's a good idea to have a clean plastic sheet on the ground to catch any meat that falls and de-oil the sword before cutting otherwise it's not going to taste the best (but should be nice and tender!) ;-)

TARGET # 8: Wood

From 1" x 1" lengths of wood from the hardware store to 3" saplings, wood is a good test of a sword's overall structural integrity and cutting power, however the resilient nature of this target tends to leave scratches on the blade.

Saplings in particular are much tougher targets to cut than many people might at first think, due in part to the hard vessels within a living tree that are used to transport water throughout the limbs which tend to bunch up on the blade as it cuts and can cause the edge to roll, especially on a bad cut.

1" x 1" lengths of softer woods such as those available at your local hardware store are a better alternative as they are cheap, readily available and can tell you a lot about the durability of your sword and your own cutting power.



Anything thicker than this is really pushing the sword further than its intended use and should probably be avoided, though some people (like myself) like to test out my swords on blocks of firewood – primarily because that while it does indeed stress the blade and is destructive testing – it is something I like to do to see if anything loosens up or takes a set (and as you can see by [this post](#) on my armoury – I am not alone in this).

In general though, for non (or at least minimal) destructive testing purposes, woods like aspen and poplar are excellent—and avoid pine, too many knotty bits that will catch the blade and cause severe edge damage or worse.



YOUTUBE EXAMPLE

While I tend to use a very thick woodblock in my durability tests, this is not advised as a general, everyday target.

True, while some swords can handle it better than others, such a medium is extremely unforgiving and could potentially result in severe injury if an error of judgement occurs.

Click on the image to see the vid.

TARGET #9: Bamboo

From the thin but quite strong lengths of river cane to traditional thick green bamboo, this traditional medium for testing the Japanese sword has also seen some popularity with the Western Martial arts (WMA) community— not to mention the Korean Gumdo styles of swordsmanship, where it is a regular feature of their competitions.

When inserted into the middle of a roll of tatami omote, Bamboo is believed to simulate the thickness and consistency of human bone.

Be sure when selecting bamboo or river cane only to use the fresh green stuff as the old and yellowed bamboo is extremely tough and tends to splinter instead of cutting cleanly. While it is possible to cut it cleanly (after all, I did it with the [Generation 2 Roman Wasp Waisted Gladius](#)) it risks unsightly scratching of the blade.



TARGET # 10: BEACH MATS

Like rolled up soaked newspapers, straw Beach mats are another ‘poor mans tatami mats’ due to their easy availability in the summer months and low per unit price. Unfortunately, it takes approximately 3-4 rolled beach mats to equal the mass of a single rolled Tatami—and the Tatami is still stiffer.

Of course, this means that it is pretty easy to make a huge fat target from Beach Mats that looks impressive to cut, but only has the resistance of a couple of authentic tatami. Such practices are pretty deceptive unless declared openly, but you can often tell by the color. (Good new Tatami have a green tea hue while Beach mats are a dark brown color).

TARGET # 11: TATAMI OMOTE



These days, rolled Tatami Omote (sometimes referred to as 'Goza') have become the standard medium for testing both the blade and the skill of the cutter in the Japanese Sword Arts. But surprisingly, Tatami is a fairly recent test cutting target...

Back in the old days, Japanese swordsmen used to test their swords on the bodies of executed criminals. At some point, as the number of bodies became hard to source – they found that a bundle of tightly bound rice straw with a bamboo insert provided the same level of resistance...

However the use of rolled Tatami Omote as a standard test cutting medium is largely attributed to modern Japanese sword master Toshishiro Obata of the [Skinkendo school](#), who found that in the cities it was difficult to source straw, but easy to get hold of the coverings of the Japanese Tatami floor mats – and after some tests, found that they have the same consistency as the bundled staw – hence it is possible to assert that a properly made tatami mat of a certain diameter is equal to severing a particular body part....

Essentially, each tatami mat is tightly rolled, bound by string at intervals and then soaked overnight for approx 16 to 24 hours before being drained shortly before cutting (around 20 to 30mins). Soaking less than this time means that the tatami omote will be too light and easy to cut.

While Tatami Omote are the premium standardized choice for test cutting, as a single rolled mat is considered to approximate the thickness of a human arm (and with a length of bamboo inserted in the middle, the human neck) they can be cost prohibitive. Prices for a good quality [Mugen Dachi](#) Tatami mat start at around \$3.20 per mat (excluding shipping, which can nearly double the price), though you can cut them in half before rolling (i.e. 'half mat') to get more cuts out of each omote.

I've personally bought all my mats from [Tameshigiri.com](#) as they are considered to be the most authentic and standardized mats available and are well respected and regularly used by the JSA community. They also have detailed information on how to properly roll the mats and prepare the targets.

CONCLUSION

I think that about covers it. Though there are a few targets left unmentioned that I have used to test swords on at Sword Buyers Guide – specifically, bricks, steel tubing, other swords and cinderblocks to name a few...

However, there is a big difference between standard backyard cutting and abusive sword tests. And if you see the results of the destructive testing, a lot of these targets resulted in the sword taking permanent damage – **THESE EXTREME TESTS WERE CONDUCTED SO THAT YOU DON'T HAVE TO!!**

In other words, they were conducted to let you know exactly how much abuse a given sword can actually take – not suggested as a recommended way to treat a sword – which is exactly what this guide has been about, giving you a good selection of targets with information on what they are likely to do to your sword so that YOU can make an informed decision.

Backyard cutting is a great hobby and a lot of fun. But always remember, safety first – after all, let's not forget what swords were originally invented to do...

Paul Southren

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