

Why it's time to unlock the woodland chest

With 80% of our timber imported but less than 60% of our woodland utilised, we are missing a valuable opportunity, as Tim Field explains

A LEGACY can take many forms but when it comes to land and estates, nothing beats trees. To celebrate a new-born child, an anniversary or any notable occasion, planted trees leave a memory forged in the landscape. The Tories have tapped into this, not least in their party logo, with Philip Hammond's announcement last year for a £60m tree budget and the Government's pledge to plant 11 million trees in its 2017-22 term.

Specimen trees bring a certain romance but true splendour comes from larger tracts of woodlands that are rich in wildlife, offer terrific sport and a stable income with resilience for future generations. However, in these dynamic times it's not simply about planting more whips in the hope they'll turn into mighty oaks; woodlands and forests should be carefully planned and managed to realise their value into perpetuity.

According to a recent report by the Royal Forestry Society (RFS), investigating missed opportunities for bringing woodland into management, the Government set a target of 67% woods to be under a management plan by 2018 but we remain at only 59% in England and 57% in Wales, despite a 30-year

high on timber and wood fuel prices. Appropriate planting and management of woodland is widely understood to benefit biodiversity, flood management and carbon sequestration, yet the UK continues to underutilise this valuable resource. The RFS believes the discrepancy equates to up to £7.8m of production in England and £2.2m in Wales, with indirect gains for the rural economy, employment and natural capital.

We might be forgiven for leaving our woodlands to just 'naturalise' with a perception that it is most beneficial to wildlife, however, this is often not the case, particularly with the ever-evolving stresses from climate change, disease and pests. Whether beastly storms or droughts, ash dieback, larch tree disease or the nuisance of grey squirrels, optimum value and resilience comes from correct species choice and dedicated management.

Planting and management schemes can be as complex as the entrepreneurial spirit allows – in species, layout and over time. At the GWCT's Allerton Project in Leicestershire a mixed stand of deciduous trees has been planted recently. It begins life with

grazing sheep beneath, before the canopy becomes warm enough for pheasant cover. Then, thinning commences as operations start to include a timber and fuel enterprise. According to the RFS report, the UK imports 80% of its timber requirements for sawn wood, panels, pellets, paper and even firewood. Both new and underutilised existing forestry stock can help reduce dependency on imports. Furthermore, the well-known improvement to environmental and amenity value from correct management translates into welcome support from public money for public goods. Where it isn't already, forestry enterprises should be reconsidered as a viable land management option when the Agriculture Bill is put into action.

One of the challenges to woodland management is size; according to the RFS, 40% of woodland is in parcels of ownership of less than 20 hectares, which is less viable with conventional operations. However, examples across continental Europe demonstrate that cooperative methods address the issue of scale. Another challenge, particularly of lowland broadleaf woodland management, is the perceived distraction against more profitable land use options. The traditional government grants are seen to be restrictive, wrapped in red tape and increasingly unattractive. A resulting shortfall of supply led to diminishing contractors in the supply chain and those remaining are inclined towards monoculture: large, management operations.

Government pledges, a new Agriculture Bill and an increasingly hostile environment for woodlands is prompting a rethink of tree planting and management. It is worth exploring the numerous sources of funding, information and inspiration that will enable a favourable legacy for any parcel of land. ■



PLANTING FOR RESILIENCE

The Royal Forestry Society advises to adopt a 'Portfolio Approach' for species planting, according to site conditions and owner's appetite for risk.

Native, underrated species such as wild service tree and wild cherry should be rediscovered.

One method to improve climate change resilience is to increase genetic diversity within a species; introduce trees from two up to five degrees latitude south (approximately 140-350 miles south of your location).

THE ENTREPRENEUR

English Willow are a new generation of cricket bat willow buyers, growers and suppliers. They create new plantations, buy mature willows and replant stands across the UK for a range of landowners over a spectrum of scale. The planting returns an income from low-lying, wet ground that is often relatively underutilised. A onetime investment yields a generous, tax-free return for the next generation.



THE FUNDERS

SCHEMES TO EXPLORE

- ◆ The Woodland Trust has the PUR Scheme, with up to 100% funding for more specialist schemes
- ◆ MOREwoods scheme offers 50%-60% funding for traditional broadleaf planting of less than 3ha
- ◆ The Forestry Commission and Natural England run Countryside Stewardship for more than 3ha, directed towards biodiversity, and...
- ◆ Woodland Carbon Fund focused towards timber on more than 10ha
- ◆ Planning and design grants also exist