

Note No. 018: Reclaimed Timber

Guidance Notes are intended to examine the sustainability or otherwise of types of materials, products and practices currently used by designers and the landscape industry at large.

A list of pros and cons is presented, together with references where available for further reading.

No reference is made or to be inferred to any company, brand or trademark.

The SGLD may make a recommendation or have a preferred position on the use or non-use of the material in question.



Introduction

Reclaimed timber is an environmentally-friendly approach to the sourcing and use of timber in garden construction. It is not without issues, as it is hard to source consistently, may be labour intensive in making useable and some contractors might not like using it. Huge amounts of useable timber go to landfill, shredding or are burnt each year, which could be put to good use and can help keep carbon locked up for longer.

Designing recycled timber into your project can give a unique look and finish, whilst substantially lowering the carbon footprint of the garden.

Do not confuse timber reclamation with timber recycling - recycling generally involves chipping waste wood to make other timber-chip based products or landscape mulches.

Positives

Personal

- Unique look and finish
- Low carbon footprint to the garden
- Reclaimed tropical timber has all the benefits of new timber but keeps redundant timber productive
- Older timber is often of higher quality and integrity than new, especially softwoods

Environmental

- Prolongs the use of an existing material, reducing demand for new timber and keeps existing carbon locked in
- Promotes locally-based trade and reclamation from building sites etc.
- Reduces demand for new, and potentially, illegally logged, timbers
- Locally sourced means low transport-miles
- Promotes cradle-to-cradle design and process
- Reduces risk of importing pest or disease from new foreign timber
- The UK produces 10m tonnes of wood waste per annum but only recycles 1m tonnes

Negatives

Personal

- Finish and look may be slightly less predictable
- May cost more, in total cost + labour (reclamation and preparation time), than new timber
- Some timber (especially softwoods) could have decay and not last as long as desired

Environmental

- As the reclamation process is relatively easy there are few, if any, environmental negatives.
- Genuine reclaimed railway sleepers are no longer available due to carcinogenic creosote content
- Very old timber could have lead paint or arsenic preservatives

Recommendations

Make locally recycled timber your go-to option for your projects. Find a local supplier and work with them to get the timber and finish that you want. Work with contractors who have the skillset/patience/willingness to work with a reclaimed timber. This is one of the strongest areas to put principal above cost. Work with your clients to explain the reasoning and benefits of using reclaimed timber as the first choice. Not everything can be done this way, but this should be the preferred option (see Hierarchy of preference and action, GN-022 Tropical Timbers).

References and further reading

The following links may be useful (there are very few pages that are not business promotions):

<https://www.communitywoodrecycling.org.uk/>

<https://www.building.co.uk/focus/recycling-timber-wasting-away/5078393.article>

<https://ashwelltimber.com/> a landscape-orientated reclamation yard

<http://www.thetimbermill.co.uk/> another reclamation company

<https://timberreclamation.co.uk/> same

There are many local sources of reclaimed timber, from ebay, gumtree or freecycle to local reclamation companies - find them on the internet.