

## Note No. 022: Tropical Timbers

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

Tropical timber is a popular and common material in a designed garden, the wood is often, hard, smooth and stable, making it ideal for items such as furniture, decking and fencing. It is also potentially one of the most devastating materials from the point of environmental destruction and carbon emissions. Whilst an FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certificate may be valid, According to FoE (Friend's of the Earth) in 2001 less than 1% of tropical timber imported into the UK was FSC certified and 62% was probably illegally felled . This has improved considerably since then (although current figures are hard to find); as an EU Member State, the UK is required to implement the EU Timber Regulation, which came in-to force in March 2013. Apparently this will continue in equivalence after Brexit.

All our timber specification decisions make an impact upon the environment in the most global and graphic of ways.

## Positives

### Personal

- A beautiful range of tough, durable timbers, often free from knots and stable in use, wide range of grains and finish

### Environmental

- Of good duration in the finished landscape, slow to rot

## Negatives

### Personal

- Some negative image from the use of such timbers because of environmental impact, perceived as inappropriate use

### Environmental

- Destruction of tropical forest environments. Even many plantation-based timbers are on land once part of a tropical ecosystem
- Damage to rainforest is not limited to the loss of trees, with many animals and indigenous peoples being endangered
- Soils are degraded on logged land, releasing sequestered carbon and of time-limited use for grazing or agriculture
- Cleared rainforest is a reduction of oxygen generating ecosystem
- FSC certification many not be genuine - there are well-documented cases of importers and manufacturers falsifying certificates
- Transportation of timbers from across the world is carbon-intensive and adds considerable carbon footprint and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions
- Use of tropical timbers reduces demand and incentive for locally-grown timber supply and may be cheaper

## Recommendations

A simple hierarchy of preference and action.:

1. Buy locally reclaimed timber first, either softwood or hardwood
2. Buy locally-grown (UK) certified timber
3. Buy European/Scandinavian certified timber
4. Consider recycled-composite timber, bamboo or hemp based timber
5. Buy selective, sustainably managed and certified tropical timber in accordance with the ratings in the FoE "Good Wood Guide". But consider this option as a failure of design.

---

## References and further reading

The following links may be useful:

<https://friendsoftheearth.uk/natural-resources/good-wood-guide-how-and-why-use-sustainable-timber>

<https://www.fsc-uk.org/en-uk/about-fsc/what-is-fsc>

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn20550-sustainable-timber-is-not-always-what-it-seems/>

<http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1003369/how-illegally-harvested-timber-is-greenwashed-in-china?from=timeline&isappinstalled=0>

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/feb/24/kew-gardens-tree-library-war-on-illegal-logging>

<https://www.illegal-logging.info/sites/files/chlogging/uploads/FOEUKillegalimports.pdf>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-21590484>

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/838819/opss-delivery-report-2019-annex-a-timber.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/838819/opss-delivery-report-2019-annex-a-timber.pdf)

Other Guidance Notes to reference:

GN-018 Reclaimed timber

GN-019 UK native hardwood

GN-020 UK native softwood

GN-021 UK coppiced wood