

ALDER - A TREE WITH A HISTORY AND A FUTURE

Ask any good countryman which of our native trees was used to make clogs and his first reply will probably be “alder.” Ask any good craftsman which of our native timbers is best suited to modern processing methods and his first reply will be any thing but alder. Yet if we compare the properties of this very attractive timber with the needs of modern industry we can appreciate its potential.

Alder is easy to propagate from seed. The young trees grow rapidly on a wide variety of soils, including waterlogged soils and industrial residues. Grown in competition, alder produces tall, straight stems with a tendency to self prune. The first sawlogs are ready in 20 years and cut stems re-grow a vigorous coppice.

Alder is easy to saw and produces excellent veneer. The sawn timber dries quickly with minimal loss due to shrinkage and distortion, better than any other European hardwood. When dry the timber has a kind, even grain ideally suited to high quality finishes. It takes stains and colours well (it is often used in expensive modern furniture to mimic exotic hardwoods)

Very little alder is harvested in Wales. That which is finds a market in high quality kitchens and flooring for special commissions. The timber is an attractive pale brown with a natural lustre. Burrs are common, they dry well with little distortion.

Alder is classed as a “perishable” unsuitable for external use but as a porous timber it absorbs all sorts of preservatives readily and responds very well to heat treatment taking on the rich dark brown colour of walnut.

On the farm alder performs well in new shelterbelts getting ahead of competing vegetation very quickly even on high ground and exposed sites. Coppicing will maintain the density of the shelterbelt but it makes sense to establish mixtures with shrubs like hawthorn and blackthorn.

CALU has produced a series of leaflets about farm woodlands, including advice on shelterbelts, sawing timber on the farm, and heat treating timber. This autumn and winter we will again be hosting a series of woodland events and training days in conjunction with Coed Cymru. Visit www.calu.bangor.ac.uk to find out more.