GO NATIVE! Buying and Using British Wood

Time to Wane

John Lloyd explains why he buys native timber, how to overcome the fears involved, and how to remove the waney edges

Grading

Before you head for the timberyard for your first foray into native hardwood, I would recommend that you get hold of a Forestry Commission publication that looks at just about everything related to the conversion and sale of timber. Visit forestry.gov.uk/hardwoods where you'll find *Making the Grade* in pdf format.

This pamphlet will help you to understand what timber grades and sub grades are, how oddly-shaped boards are measured and how defects are 'measured out'. The extensive glossary will also enable you to impress the yard manager with your knowledge of timberyard jargon, from 'checks', 'cat's paw' and 'heart shakes' to the 'hoppus foot'.

What is it about buying timber that induces staring eyes and sweaty palms? Surely it's just a bit of shopping? But it requires a relatively large financial outlay, for a product not made to a standard specification, or a guaranteed and repeatable size and quality, which is not neatly packaged and sold from a shimmering, highly polished glass-faced retail facility nestled next to World of Leather in the local shopping and leisure park. A timberyard is often in the middle of nowhere and might involve negotiating mud, grumpy-looking bearded men with chainsaws, and precarious towers of wood of indistinguishable species, all housed in an old badly-lit shed.

A timberyard might also be a sawmill, and this sort of set-up will receive whole trees or 'butts' to be milled into boards using a gargantuan bandsaw. The boards are then put 'into stick' for air-drying and some months or years later kilned to get the moisture content down to a level that's suitable for making furniture. In contrast, the appealing thing about imported hardwood is that it usually looks fairly presentable, all the edges look neat and tidy, being straight and square, which allows the boards to be densely and efficiently packed into a container, making shipping more cost effective.

Buying local wood

Native hardwoods, on the other hand, are generally supplied as 'waney edged' meaning that the wiggly edge of the tree, probably including the bark, has not been removed from each board. Why waste time and energy chopping the edges off if the timber's only going to move a few yards between being milled and sold?

Drying **Boules of timber which have been milled 'through and through' air-drying outside. An advantage of buying wood like this is you should be able to pick consecutive boards**

What's the benefit of buying native timber? Well of course it will have much better 'green' credentials as it will not have travelled halfway across the world. I recently bought some elm from my local timberyard to make a dining table for my lovely wife. The timber had just come out of the kiln, looked rather lovely and had spent its life growing just down the road from Brighton. Perhaps I'm just an old romantic, but knowing the timber's provenance clinched the deal for me.

Of course another benefit is that all of the timber for a given project can come from the same tree, giving a consistency of colour that's hard to achieve with square-edged imported timber, which is likely to have been shuffled during handling and packing.

Stacks **Home-grown hardwoods stacked in the sawmill at English Woodlands, near Midhurst, West Sussex (ewtimber.co.uk, 01730 816941). Marks from the sticks (right) can be seen, but should be invisible once you've planed away the dust, though very very occasionally there can be staining if the wrong stickers have been used. Ask to be able to plane a little to see the wood a bit better**

You don't have to visit a timberyard to buy timber, you could just send a cutting list and have the excitement of seeing what turns up on the lorry, but that approach has been known to end in tears. There's a considerable risk that the timberyard's choice will not be yours, and they may not give much thought to how the timber will look when it's transformed into furniture.

The intimidating bit about buying waney-edged timber is that the boards often look rather the worse for wear by the time they are offered for sale, which is perhaps no great surprise. Most stacks of native, waney-edged timber have been hanging around in the wind and weather for a year or more before they make it into the kiln and then the shed for sale.

Waney-edged boards, which are normally cut 'through and through' or 'plain sawn' will have some boards with alarming-looking splits at their ends and down the middle, and they can often be anything but straight. A stack, or 'boule' of timber in the shed will probably still look like a tree, made up of consecutive slices, stacked in the same order as when they were milled, nothing's been cleaned up or taken away and the boards will be the same length as the 'butt' when it was first delivered to the yard.

Your challenge when buying this sort of timber is to see through the dust and mentally cut the complete board into useable chunks of wood that will avoid the splits and knots.

Selecting wood

If you've chanced upon a nice friendly timberyard, and you're on your own, the chap in the yard will help you to lift each board to inspect it, and if you don't like the look of the first stack, don't be afraid to ask to see another, even if it means the friendly yard man has to move several tons of timber with a forklift to get to the next one.

If the boards look very dusty and it's difficult to see the figure and colour of the timber ask the yardman if you can clean up a small part of the board with the block plane you thoughtfully put in your pocket before you left the workshop.

When inspecting each board, look for splits, knots and twist ('wind', pronounced wined), but don't reject boards too hastily, remember that you are unlikely to find a perfect waney-edged plank. Think about your cutting list and if you like the look of a particular board, use a tape measure to make a rough check to see where the components might fit, while avoiding the knots and other faults.

Remember that waney-edged timber is going to be cheaper than square-edged, square foot by square foot, to reflect the expectation that there will be a good deal more waste. Some of

Offcuts You should be able to rootle around to find odd bits that suit your projects and your budget in a good timberyard. Don't forget that you are the customer, and don't be frightened to take your time

the faults might be 'measured out' by the yardman. There's a bit of negotiation that might be done here, at the very least you might enquire if a certain fault will be 'measured out', and not included in the measurements when he calculates the volume you are buying. This might encourage him to do so, even if he hadn't planned to, but don't push your luck too much, you're not in the souks of Marrakesh!

Having picked some nice looking boards, it's a good idea to check whether you have too much, or too little, timber to complete the project. This is not a precise science but the yardman might let you to draw your components on the boards with a piece of chalk so that you don't lose track of what you're doing. Remember that the yardman is there to help, and that he has probably spent a good part of his working life picking timber for customers who have just sent in a cutting list to the yard. So don't be frightened to make use of his expertise, and if he falls into the not very helpful, surly yardman category, you always have the option of taking your cutting list elsewhere!

Having established that you have about the right amount of timber, if it's a bit marginal I will always add another board, even if it's not needed. It can just go into stock, but the inconvenience of not having enough timber, for me outweighs the inconvenience of storing the odd board for Ron.

Estimating costs

At this stage it might be a good idea to get a feel for how much money the man in the office is going to remove from your credit card. Despite edicts from those charming EC bureaucrats, I work in cubic feet when I'm buying timber, and in fact when you ask the cost of timber it is still generally priced that way, though sometimes it will be by the cubic metre.

If you don't find it easy to visualise a long flat board as a multiple of foot square cubes, you might just bear in mind that a 1in thick board that is 1ft wide will contain 1 cubic foot of timber if it's 12ft long. This might be enough to get a rough guesstimate of the cost of the timber, which could avoid the embarrassment of having a cardiac arrest in the sales office.

Next Issue *John Lloyd looks at defects in wood, and how to embrace or avoid them.*

Snappy John using a chalk line to mark the straight edge along the waney-edged board. If there is a lot of curve consider cutting the board in two so there is less waste

Bandsaw The challenge with a bandsaw is supporting the end as it comes off the table. Fortunately John's tablesaw is the same height, but you may prefer to use roller stands

Fundamentals Fact File

No.7 Ripping Waney Edges

How to cut straight boards from the wane

Having bought some waney-edged timber, the first thing to do is to remove the curves and create a straight, square edge. How to do this rather depends on the sizes of the components, how best to get them from the board with the minimum of waste and what equipment is at your disposal. Obviously taking long, straight, wide components from a board with a pronounced curve is going to result in a lot of waste, but this can be minimised by cutting a curved board into shorter lengths for shorter parts before removing the waney edge.

Marking up the board is the first operation. I use an old Stanley Chalk-O-Matic chalk line to mark a straight edge, and this is a must-have piece of kit in my opinion. Having marked the edge you might use a panel saw to remove the edge; less physically taxing than you might imagine if the line is in the lighter coloured and softer sapwood, next to the bark.

A 'Skil' saw (portable circular saw) could also be used, either free-hand or running along a straight-edge that has been cramped to the board, or perhaps a jigsaw. My preference is to use either my bandsaw or tablesaw, but remember that it is dangerous to try to run a curved edge along a straight fence, especially on a tablesaw, and it is equally dangerous to attempt to cut anything free-hand on a tablesaw. In either case there is a considerable risk of kickback if the blade gets jammed in the cut, and huge pieces of wood being launched into the air in a confined space is never going to be healthy. A bandsaw can certainly be used safely to cut along the chalk-line free-hand, but only if there is adequate support for the board on the out-feed side of the table, particularly if it is a big, long, heavy piece of timber. Either use a fixed table extension or a roller stand. Obviously a free-hand cut on a bandsaw will not be absolutely straight, but it should be straight enough to use against a fence to make a second parallel cut to remove the other waney edge.

If you have a tablesaw with a sliding table, this can be used to make a very accurate straight edge on a waney-edged board. The important thing to remember though is that the board being cut must not be longer than the 'stroke' of the sliding table, otherwise it will be impossible to complete the cut when the sliding carriage hits the stop.

My Hammer B3 tablesaw has a purpose-made fitting called an 'edging shoe', which fixes into the far end of the sliding carriage. You find these on Felder, Axminster and Martin saws too. The board being trimmed is pushed firmly into the shoe while it is being slid past the blade. It helps to have a handle on the sliding carriage to pull while you push the board into the shoe. The alternative is to use a clamp or hold-down at the far end of the carriage in place of the 'shoe'. The only issue when using a tablesaw is that if the board is twisted along its length, it can try to twist itself while it's being cut which can produce some kickback, but this can be prevented by packing under a corner, or if it's too bad, switching to the bandsaw.

Skill Remove any shakes at the end of a board with a Skil saw, but otherwise a board like this will be ripped in two

Shoes Using the shoe on a Hammer tablesaw to hold a board while ripping it. John has an old Chalk-O-Matic chalk line to mark out quick straight edges