



THE NEW SPECIES OF THE SEASON

Dr Morwenna Spear says British birch is worth so much more than just firewood



Winter: a time for hunkering down indoors. Getting out of the weather. In our collective imaginations this is with a roaring fire, and in the festive period we picture our predecessors celebrating with a yule (yew) log, perceived to give extra warmth, from its high density, and representing the resilience of the green yew trees still standing in the bare forest.

Wind the clock forwards and perhaps you expect me to wax

lyrical about oak, our national favourite timber. Many of us may see traditional green oak frame structures as we call into the local Christmas tree festival in the parish church or in the interior of a cosy country pub over the holiday period. Or perhaps fir should be our tree of the season. The favoured shed-less Christmas tree, no needles in the carpet to vex us as we vacuum time and again into January.

But I propose the species of the modern Christmas season is actually birch. Birch gets everywhere in Christmas Market stalls and garden centres at this time of year. Birch plywood laser cut into festive shapes and baubles; the distinctive silver of birch bark wrapped round candle pots and ornaments.

Last Christmas I was given a birch ply assemble-yourself drum kit (desk toy, not full size unfortunately). Perhaps you've spent previous Boxing Days helping the kids assemble birch ply dinosaurs or Santa Clauses. The precision and ease of laser cutting, coupled with a wonderfully uniform timber product. No splinters. Easy peasy.

Birch is surprisingly common in Britain, but rarely managed with the sawmiller in mind. Its widespread use in mixed broadleaves for amenity woodlands (go and check some out on your New Year's day walk) means that there is a lot of it about. And a lot of it makes its way into firewood, harvested relatively young, so small diameter dense logs which burn cleanly without resin to spit and crackle in the grate. Several large retailers sell nicely dried hardwood logs that are almost exclusively birch.

The timber deserves much better than this. Straight grained, strong, hard and easy to work. A current project by Forest Research is investigating the properties of home-grown birch and sycamore, recognising that these are species of the future. Wood workers already know that it is well suited to everything from furniture to children's toys. Hopefully the birch firewood product that we see is the thinnings from stands managed for larger sawlogs in future years. However, I suspect many woodland owners are managing on relatively short rotation simply for firewood production.

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If you go to Finland where they specialise in growing birch for plywood, you'd be surprised to find how small the birch trees are at maturity. With our expanding birch resource there may come a time to re-investigate plywood manufacture in Britain. After all, what better way to keep us in supplies of laser cut knick-knacks for future Christmas seasons. ■

Below: Birch plywood laser cut into Christmas decorations



The Wood Technology Society

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