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## Reviving the old tradition of coppice to create a sustainable fuel

Grant Jenkins of The Tree Company says that with the country locked in the icy jaws of a Siberian winter and a carbon tax on fuels in the last budget, thinking of alternative fuel and reviving the old woodland tradition of trees grown for coppice is worth consideration.



*Coppices are cut on a short rotation of between seven to twenty-five years. The woods are divided into blocks and a block is harvested each year; the aim is to achieve a continuous rotation of harvest with various stages of regrowth.*



it is worth considering that often what you gain in growth rate you lose in timber density which can affect the quality of the firewood.

Not only can coppice be grown for fuel, it can be used for more traditional purposes, examples are Ash and Sweet Chestnut poles can be used for fencing. Hazel for hurdle making, pea sticks and bean poles. Grown on a larger scale, coppice woodlands are of great conservation value. This is because when they are cut on a rotation they provide different habitat at each different growth stage.

Coppice timber makes excellent fire wood because it can be grown to diameter to suit your needs, it splits easily and the twigs and branches make excellent kindling. When carried out on a small scale the timber yield may not be enough to keep you in wood fuel throughout the winter, this is however all relative to what your needs are. Whatever your demand for wood fuel might be, whether complementing your current fuel source or a project on a larger scale, growing trees for coppice is a renewable resource that will reduce your use of fossil fuels. It creates a long lived continuous tree cover which is good for wildlife and the environment. It is not an instant fix but a long term project so why not start planning and get planting your own coppice this season.

*If you need any further information regarding this article or indeed any other tree matters please get in touch with us at The Tree Company, Ballydehob, Co Cork or email us at [info@thetreecompany.ie](mailto:info@thetreecompany.ie) or call our office on 028 37630.*

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The term 'coppice' comes from the French verb couper, meaning 'to cut'. Coppice is a method of managing trees and woodland to grow small diameter wood that traditionally was used for making a vast range of practical items. In Ireland there is evidence of coppicing from the early Christian period and which continued until the seventeenth century. This skill as a widespread practice had began to decline during the seventeenth and eighteenth century as woodland was removed in favour of farmland.

Coppices are woodlands cut on a short rotation of between seven to twenty-five years depending on species and timber requirements. The woods are divided into blocks and a

block is harvested each year; the aim is to achieve a continuous rotation of harvest with various stages of regrowth. Coppiced trees are cut almost to the ground to encourage multi stem regrowth from the stump, these poles are then allowed to grow on for the chosen period for the tree species and the diameter of the timber required. The timber is then harvested and the process starts all over again.

Coppice woodland usually cover large areas of land, but the concept can be scaled down for use in the garden. If you have a small piece of land or corner of the garden you may think about setting this aside to grow a small copse of trees that can be coppiced for wood fuel. Trees grown for coppice

can also be incorporated into hedge rows and cut on a rotation system.

Various species of tree can be grown but they have to be deciduous because most coniferous trees once cut down will not regenerate from the stump. Ash and sycamore grow quickly and coppice well in West Cork. The trees most commonly coppiced include species such as oak, ash, willow, hazel and sweet chestnut. Creating your own coppice is not an instant process, first you need to plant the tree species of your choice as a small tree or whip of between two and three metre spacing. You then grow them on until they are established approximately five to eight years or when they reach a suitable size. This is then felled to four to six inch stump and then left to grow into multi stem poles. Coppicing should be carried out in March and April once the risk of frost damaging the new shoots is gone. Maintenance should be carried out to protect the new shoots from browsing animals and competition from weed, grass and briar in the initial growing stage. Also occasional removal of dead, diseased, crossing or weak stems in favour of strong, vigorous growth as the coppice gets bigger. Bear in mind the maintenance should be low and the trees should be left alone to grow. You can choose fast growing species like Alder but



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