

Ash For Hurley's

Introduction

Ash timber is strong and flexible with a good capacity for shock absorbency. For this reason ash has been traditionally used in Ireland for the production of hurleys.

Irish ash is said to be the best ash for hurley making due to the mild damp climate. There have been experiments with the timber of other trees but nothing has proven to be as good as ash.

Ash is native to Ireland and grows freely in many hedgerows around Ireland. It grows particularly well in the midland counties and parts of Munster where hurling is traditionally played. Growing hurley ash as a crop is usually carried out in conjunction with the generous grants and premiums available for growing an ash timber crop; the Hurley crop is harvested as a thinning operation while retaining the final timber crop to mature.

The Market

There are 3 elements to the market for Hurley ash in Ireland: Demand, Supply and Quality.

The demand for hurley butts has grown by 30% in recent years and it is continuing to expand. Supply will increase dramatically over the next few years due to the increase in ash planting. Due to this increase there are obvious concerns expressed that the market would be flooded once the current crop of ash reaches the required size. However, it is likely that demand will always be high for quality material.

While the price may well drop somewhat it will still give a good return for quality material.

Of the total hurleys produced every year (approx 350,000), over three quarters of ash timber used is imported from the continent. Currently the market is supplied by ash from all across Europe: Romania, Poland and the Czech Republic and other Eastern European countries, along with Germany and Britain. Coillte have been working with the GAA and the Irish Guild of Ash Hurley Makers – formed in 1998 to develop the home market for hurleys and combat moves to introduce the plastic hurley.



Fact Sheet No. 35
May 2006

This is one of a series of fact sheets on potential income generating activities.

All fact sheets are available in the Advisory Section of the Teagasc Website
www.teagasc.ie

Edited by:
John Whiriskey
Paul McCarthy
Teagasc
Mellows Development
Centre
Athenry, Co. Galway.
+ 353 (0) 91 845200

Teagasc Fact Sheets present a brief overview of a topic. Further detailed advice should always be sought from relevant sources.

Production Method

Ash will only produce quality timber suitable for Hurley manufacture if it is grown on suitable sites, preferably at low elevation where there is good shelter. Ash thrives on deep fertile soils (limestone loams are ideal) which are moist but well drained. It should only be planted in soils that are rich in nutrients especially nitrogen and phosphorus. It does not tolerate prolonged water logging or compacted soils or low lying areas where late spring frosts can cause forking of the stem. In unsuitable sites it may develop brown or black heart, a discolouration in the heartwood which will reduce its marketability.

Under the current afforestation grant scheme Ash is planted in 2.0 X 1.5 metre spacing which amounts to 3,300 plants per hectare. Good vegetation control is vital over a few years usually 3-4 years to ensure a fast growing high quality crop.

Hurleys are manufactured from the butt log (bottom 1.5 metre of the stem) and from trees ideally of a diameter at breast height of approximately 25-30 centimetres (smaller trees can be used). Only fast grown, straight and branch free ash can be used for this purpose. In fast growing plantations, harvesting can be as early as 20 years.

It is important to draw up a management plan for the crop at the beginning with advice from a professional forester.

Establishment Costs and Profit Margins

Quality Ash provides an early return on investment compared to other broadleaf trees.

The Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture and Food grant-aids broadleaf plantations as small as 0.1ha. The grant covers the full cost of establishment and maintenance over a 4-year period. An annual premium is also paid (€442 per ha/yr for farmers).

The main investment for the landowner is the land, as a good quality sheltered site is essential.

The value of the Hurley butt depends on size and quality. Top quality Hurley ash sells for around €45 for an average hurley butt.

Expenses of harvesting, transport and sawing would leave a price to the grower of about €20/butt.

Cutting 500 butts per hectare as part of the thinning operations of managing an ash crop would be equal to €10,000 and is tax free with the final timber crop still standing.

A Felling license is essential in order to cut ash for Hurley.

Growing ash supported by the grant schemes means that the final timber crop must be retained at the correct density. This final crop can have a wide range of end uses: flooring, furniture, internal joinery, tool handles and wood turnery.

Contacts

Your local Teagasc Forestry adviser can give you further information on growing Ash and relevant afforestation grants. See www.teagasc.ie

Produced by: Noel Culleton, Teagasc, Johnstown Castle Research Centre, County Wexford
email: noel.culleton@teagasc.ie ☎ +353 (0)53 9171200