

Beanpole fever!

Geoff Sinclair of the Woodland Trust explains how everyone can help promote locally-grown woodland products through National Beanpole Week.

“What we need is a National Beanpole Day,” exclaimed an attendee at the ‘Opening the Woodland Gate’ workshops organised and run by the Green Wood Centre and the Royal Forestry Society last year. As a veteran British beanpole campaigner and the originator of BBC, the British Beanpole Campaign, I am ashamed to say my response was “Don’t be silly”. It soon became clear that others were more enthusiastic.

Raising the Pole Profile

Many initiatives across the country promote local woodland products. There is a need for a simple means of communicating the ‘Buy Local Woodland Products’ message to the British public. What seems an obvious and simple message at first does get confusing for people. For example, research by the Small Woods Association found that people prefer to buy foreign charcoal, as they do not like the idea of cutting down trees in the UK! Before we can get people to buy our charcoal we need first to explain why it is ok to cut trees down in an English coppice wood, but that it is a bad idea to do so in the rainforest and mangrove forests elsewhere. By the time we achieve that everyone will have moved to gas barbecues because it saves trees!

Few gardeners have questioned their use of bamboo. Once you point out that they have imported a twig from China rather than cut one from the garden, hedge or local woodland they quickly recognise that this situation does not make sense. The message about ‘Beanpole miles’ is so new for most people and so obvious once they have been made aware, that they are quite shocked by the revelation!

Pole Promotion

The British Beanpole Campaign was set up over 10 years ago to help gardeners in Ipswich source and use local beanpoles. Beanpoles, peasticks and rustic poles are sold at an annual Beanpole Festival held on allotments in the town. At the same time we demonstrate how to use beanpoles and wood in the garden along with other activities promoting environmentally-friendly gardening and the wider use of local wood products. It is an unashamedly local affair and despite some terrible weather we always sell our beanpoles and get 300 plus people attending.

While our focus is very much on beanpoles we very quickly found ourselves advising on and sourcing the full spectrum of woodland products for the garden. Demand for this information led us eventually to produce the website www.allotmentforestry.com containing the largest woodland craft business directory in the UK. There are 200 businesses listed and over 6000 people visit the website each month.

The food miles and organic food campaigns have made people more questioning about their lifestyles. The starting point for these campaigns is the recognition by people that there is an environmental issue associated with their actions. By focusing on the beanpole as the flagship in a 'Buy Local Woodland Products' campaign we instantly build in the public recognition that this is an issue for the gardening public and will be so each year as their runner beans start to grow!

From a Day to a Week

A National Beanpole Day would be an ideal opportunity to connect with people and communicate effectively the 'Buy Local Woodland Products' message. Subsequent discussions within the Green Wood Centre have developed the idea into a National Beanpole Week with the first one proposed for the 19th-27th April 2008. The intention is to work with partner organisations and develop a national programme of events and activities where people can buy their beanpoles and at the same time we can communicate our wider message.

Are you interested in hosting an event or participating in National Beanpole Week? This could be by holding a woodland open day where you sell beanpoles and wood products, registering as a beanpole supplier or hosting your own Beanpole Festival; there were at least five in 2007! Small Woods Association will publicise National Beanpole Week, including any events that you pass on to us and give an internet profile to anyone producing beanpoles or other local wood products.

SWA also hosts www.coppice-products.co.uk, which contains a list of coppice workers and wood products.

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