

Living with ash dieback - Silviculture systems for Irish ash

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ABSTRACT

Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) is the most common broadleaf high forest species in Ireland. It is also one of the most important native woodland species and forms a key component in the wider cultural landscape. Ash accounts for over 3.2% of the forest estate in Ireland (approx. 21,000 ha). Over 17,000 ha of ash plantation has been established, on open-field sites, since 1990. This represents a major investment both from a landowner and state perspective. These plantations are almost exclusively monoculture ash and, being relatively young, are very susceptible to ash dieback (*Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*). It was first confirmed in Ireland in 2012. Initially an all-Ireland eradication policy was instigated in an attempt to control the spread of the disease. However, given the experience in neighbouring countries and the latest scientific advice, eradication in Ireland is no longer considered feasible. Policy reviews in Ireland broadly propose a move toward trying to manage and minimise the impacts of the disease. This will require support and advice to forest owners regarding appropriate silvicultural interventions. The general experience and research findings from Great Britain and continental Europe would broadly suggest a twofold approach to managing the silvicultural and ecological impacts of the disease. Management interventions should aim to promote: 1.) The general health, vigour and therefore longevity of the existing ash stand; and 2.) Greater species diversity with a view to building increased resilience. Where feasible, conventional thinning may promote the health and vigour of selected trees, which over time may secure a greater timber income for the forest owner. It may also preserve the ecological integrity of the woodland during the transition to a more mixed species stand. Retaining relatively healthy trees for as long as possible may also promote the species natural resistance to the pathogen. Proactively developing species diversity, particularly in Ireland's relatively young, monocultural and structurally homogenous ash plantation resource, is likely to require adapted thinning interventions whereby group and other shelterwood systems facilitate admixing. This paper presents some case-studies of possible silvicultural options for the management of ash dominated woodlands in Ireland. The majority of the Irish forest industry utilises the clearfell system with subsequent replanting. Until recently, the eradication policy for ash dieback included the clearfelling of any plantation confirmed to have the disease and then subsequent replanting with alternative species (Fig. 1A). The recently established Irish ash plantation resource has recognised thinning guidelines (see SHORT AND RADFORD 2008) that are generally a combination of rack and selection thinning, designed to provide permanent access to the plantation and to promote rapid growth of approx. 300 selected trees ha⁻¹. Some of the proposed silvicultural options below are intended to be superimposed with the rack and selection thinning. All of the proposed systems aim to take advantage of the nursing effect provided by the ash to be replaced, rather than planting into an open-field situation following a clearfell operation if restocking is required. The following systems will be outlined and case-studies of their use in Ireland presented.

Free-growth / Halo thinning

Free-growth, or halo thinning, entails the selection of vigorous, healthy trees and the removal of all surrounding crown competitors (Fig. 1B). A case-study from Ireland will be presented.

Systematic thinning with underplanting

This involves the felling of two or three lines and replanting with alternative species (Fig. 1C). A case-study from Ireland with replanting with alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) will be presented.

Selection with small coupe felling

This involves conducting a rack and selection thinning but also felling small coupes (0.025 – 0.045 ha in size) and replanting with alternative species (Fig. 1D). A case-study from Northern Ireland with replanting with native oak (*Quercus robur*), birch (*Betula pubescens*) and hazel (*Corylus avellana*) will be presented.

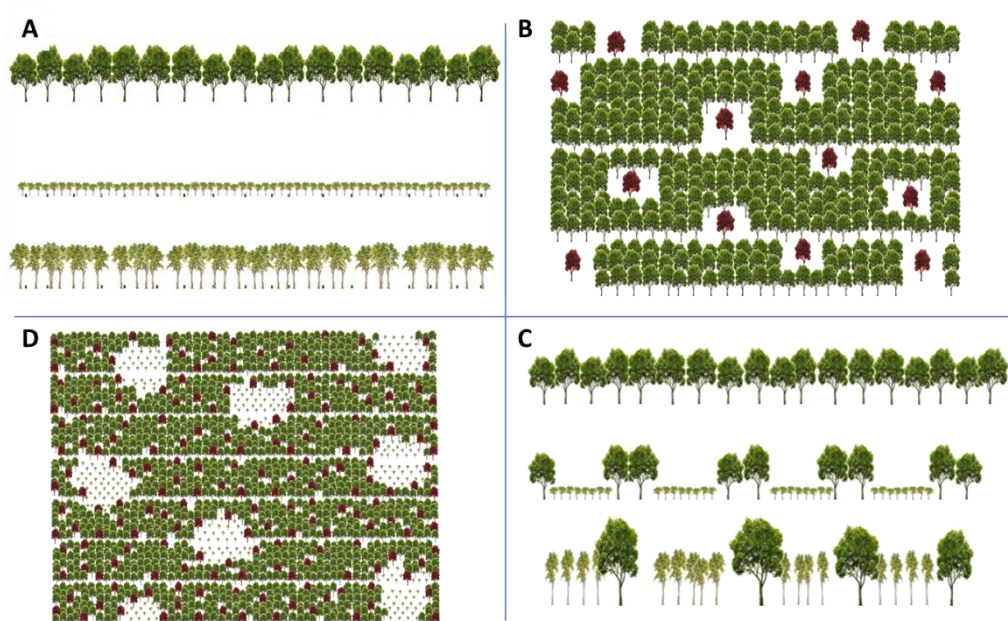


Figure 1: Silvicultural systems for management of ash in Ireland. Clockwise from top left: A) Clearfell and restock; B) Free-growth; C) Systematic thinning with underplanting; D) Small coupe felling

Potential positives from ash dieback?

The advent of ash dieback in Ireland will likely have severe consequences to the Irish landscape and implications for a developing native hardwood industry, but some positives may also occur. Improved, site specific, silviculture may develop and become more prevalent, replacing the currently predominant monoculture / clearfell practices, and thereby increase species and structural diversity and resilience to pests, diseases and changing climatic conditions. In contrast to open-field afforestation, the growth of broadleaves in uneven-aged woodland based systems may have positive implications for future hardwood stem quality.

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8TH HARDWOOD CONFERENCE
**WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON "NEW
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Peter Rademacher, Miklós Bak*

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As part of the interaction between this Action and Hardwood Conference, the following presenters have been provided with assistance for their involvement at this conference:

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ModWoodLife

Content

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Plenary session | 7 |
| Hardwood resources, process chains, challenges and solutions | 8 |
| Alfred Teischinger, Christian Huber, Christian Hansmann | |
| Wood anatomy - the role of macroscopic and microscopic wood identification against illegal logging | 10 |
| Gerald Koch, Immo Heinz, Uwe Schmitt, Hans-Georg Richter | |
| Wood modification – different processes and their use in Europe | 12 |
| Dick Sandberg, Dennis Jones | |
| COST Action FP1407 “Understanding wood modification through an integrated scientific and environmental impact approach” - Building the network and impacts of COST Action's networking tools | 14 |
| Andreja Kutnar | |
| Teaming-up for the European Hardwoods Innovation Alliance (EHIA): Take your action! | 15 |
| Andreas Kleinschmit von Lengefeld, Uwe Kies | |
| Poster Discussion | 17 |
| Wood properties of <i>Paulownia</i> Clone in vitro 112..... | 18 |
| Szabolcs Komán, Sándor Fehér | |
| Macroscopic properties and density of Pannonia poplar from West Hungarian sites | 20 |
| Domonkos Ete Farkas, Norbert Horváth | |
| Cultivation of Black Locust Plantations..... | 22 |
| Dr. László Erdős | |
| The measurement of wood shrinkage and bark thickness on increment cores | 24 |
| Baptiste Kerfriden, Lucile Savagner, Kevin Dupont-Marin, Jean-Michel Leban | |
| Relationship between density and moisture content of firewood | 26 |
| Sándor Fehér, Máté Miklós, Dávid Major, István Schantl | |
| The visual classification and strength values of the oak wood from Borsod area in Hungary | 28 |
| Horváth Dénes | |
| Beech timber for structural purposes – relationship between outer log quality and inner timber quality..... | 29 |
| C. Fischer, F. Brüchert, U.H. Sauter | |
| Culture growth of <i>Phellinus contiguus</i> under laboratory conditions..... | 33 |
| István Eső, Norbert Horváth | |
| Performance amelioration of imported timber with environ-safe preservative ziboc | 35 |
| Sadhna Tripathi, Akhato Sumi, Sauradipta Ganguly | |
| Impregnation of <i>Tilia tomentosa</i> with paraffin..... | 36 |
| Szabolcs Komán, József Ábrahám, Dávid Varga, Udo Beck, Bence Katona | |
| The impact of heat treatment on the hardness of European birch wood..... | 38 |
| Vlastimil Borůvka, Aleš Zeidler, Tomáš Holeček, Roman Dudík | |
| Colour modification of poplar wood by steaming..... | 40 |
| Endre Antal Banadics | |
| Thermal properties of thermo-treated native black poplar wood | 42 |
| Luigi Todaro, Giacomo Goli, Paola Cetera, Pietro Stefanizzi, Stefania Liuzzi, Antonio M. Pantaleo | |

| | |
|---|----|
| Sand abrasion testing of acetylated hornbeam (<i>Carpinus betulus</i> L.)..... | 44 |
| Fanni Fodor, Róbert Németh | |
| Combined Longitudinal and Transversal Compression of Beech Wood | 46 |
| Mátyás Báder, Radim Rousek | |
| Complex assessment of the antioxidant capacity and polyphenol content of wood bark | 48 |
| Eszter Táló-Nebehaj, Levente Albert, Eszter Visi-Rajczi, Tamás Hofmann | |
| Fractioning of native oak into lignocellulosic materials as an alternative for a sustainable forest management | 50 |
| Sebastián Barriga, Leyre Sillero, Jalel Labidi, Eduardo Robles | |
| Microwave Hardwood Modification Application for Fast Lumber Drying (Technical-Economic Assessment) | 51 |
| Alexandra Leshchinskaya | |
| Determination of the cutting power in processing some deciduous wood species | 53 |
| Valentin Atanasov, Georgi Kovatchev | |
| Influence of the heat on the duration of curing adhesives for veneering..... | 55 |
| Vladimir Mihailov, Dimitar Angelski, Vasil Merdzhanov | |
| Bending strength of High-Density Fibreboards (HDF) Manufactured from Wood of Hard Broadleaved Species | 57 |
| Julia Mihajlova, Viktor Savov | |
| Occurrence of shake in oak (<i>Quercus</i> spp.) and it's effect on flooring top-layer quality | 59 |
| Victor Grubíi, Jimmy Johansson | |
| The importance of forest management history in life cycle assessment (LCA) scope definition for currently harvested birch trees in Latvia | 61 |
| Edgars Kuka, Dace Cirule, Bruno Andersons | |
| The influence of saw setting and tensing on quality of beech bandsawing..... | 63 |
| Bartosz Pałubicki, Mariusz Horąa | |

Parallel Session I.

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Silvicultural aspects and material properties of hardwoods..... | 65 |
| Research Findings of High Quality Timber Producing Black Locust Breeding Activities | 66 |
| István Bach, Bálint Pataki, Jenő Németh, Sándor Horváth, Kálmán Pogrányi, Márton Németh | |
| Living with ash dieback - Silviculture systems for Irish ash | 68 |
| Ian Short, Jerry Hawe | |
| Potential of short-rotation aspen and willow biomass for novel products in bioeconomy: a demonstration project "AspenWill" | 70 |
| Rytkönen Peetu, Viherä-Aarnio Anneli, Hyväluoma Jari, Rasa Kimmo, Suhonen Heikki, Beuker Egbert, Möttönen Veikko, Jyske Tuula | |
| Demonstration of the database macroHOLZdata computer-aided identification and description of trade timbers | 72 |
| Gerald Koch, Immo Heinz, Hans-Georg Richter | |
| Moisture-dependent elastic characteristics of cherry wood by means of ultrasound and mechanical tests | 74 |
| Erik Valine Bachtiar, Peter Niemz | |
| Drying Characteristics of Sapwood, Discoloured Wood and Infected Wood of Box Elder (<i>Acer negundo</i> L) | 76 |
| Denis Plavčák, Željko Gorišek, Aleš Straže, Maks Merela | |
| Experimental determining of mass transfer coefficient during oak wood convective drying | 78 |
| Nikolay Skuratov | |

Parallel Session II.

Chemical aspects of hardwood processing 80

- Intensification process for the conversion of Kraft-hardwood lignin into small phenolic compounds 81
Javier Fernández-Rodríguez, Fabio Hernández-Ramos, Xabier Erdocia, María González Alriols,
Jalel Labidi
- Polyols from lignin and sawdust of oak wood 83
Silvia Helena Fuentes da Silva, Itziar Egües, Jalel Labid
- Eucalyptus lignins as natural additive for healthcare 84
Oihana Gordobil, René Herrera, Marwa Yahyaoui, Jalel Labidi
- Characterisation of extractives from black alder 86
Kerstin Wagner, Stefan Willför, Herman Huber, Alexander Petutschnigg, Thomas Schnabel
- In-situ Micro and Nano mechanical investigations of compressed beech wood using Scanning Electron Microscope with Focused Ion Beam 88
Petr Klímek, Dariusz Tytko, Marek Dosbaba, Radim Rousek
- Chemical modification of *Eucalyptus nitens* using fatty acids 90
René Herrera, Oihana Gordobil, Pedro L. de Hoyos-Martinez, Jalel Labidi, Rodrigo Llano-Ponte
- Monitoring of time dependent ammonia emissions in smoked oak using FTIR spectroscopy 92
Elfriede Hogger, Klaus Bauer, Eva Höllbacher, Notburga Gierlinger, Johannes Konnerth, Hendrikus W. G. van Herwijnen

Parallel Session III.

Wood modification I. 94

- Mechanical Properties of Thermally Treated Beech Wood in Compression Parallel to the Grain 95
Tomáš Andor, Rastislav Lagaňa
- Fracture toughness of thermally modified wood in mode II 97
Václav Sebera, Miguel Redon, Martin Brabec, David Děcký, Petr Čermák, Jaromír Milch, Jan Tippner
- Static and dynamic performance of wood modified with phenol formaldehyde 99
Jaka Gašper Pečnik, Hannes Schwager, Matthew Schwarzkopf, Holger Militz
- Alteration of mechanical properties of ammonia treated and densified beech (*Fagus sylvatica* L.) 101
Herwig Hackenberg, Mario Zauer, Tobias Dietrich and André Wagenführ
- Changes in Hardness as a Result of Longitudinal Wood Compression 103
Mátyás Báder, Róbert Németh, Ágnes Vörös
- Added value and utilization of untreated and heat-treated poplar (*Populus spp. L.*) with and without treatment with N-methylol compounds 105
Lukas Emmerich, Holger Militz

Parallel Session IV.

| | |
|--|------------|
| Machining & Manufacturing..... | 107 |
| Development of strategies for economic use of bark stripped beech wood | 108 |
| Ruven Hänslér, Matthias Zscheile | |
| Development of a new method for calculating the resulting cutting force using beech as an example..... | 110 |
| Thomas Krenke, Carina Rößler, Stephan Frömel-Frybort | |
| Determination of vibration during milling process of some deciduous wood species | 112 |
| Georgi Kovatchev, Valentin Atanasov | |
| Optimisation of Sawing Strategies for Hardwood using a CT-Scanner..... | 114 |
| Carina Rößler, Jörn Rathke, Martin Riegler | |
| Influence of veneer specie on the duration of veneering..... | 116 |
| Dimitar Angelski, Vasil Merdzhánov, Vladimir Mihailov | |
| Enhancing the fire resistance of poplar (<i>Populus cv. euramericana</i> l214) by using different fire retardants..... | 118 |
| Fatima Zohra Brahmia, Tibor Alpár, Péter Horváth György | |

Parallel Session V.

| | |
|--|------------|
| Wood modification II..... | 120 |
| Properties of less valuable parts of beech and sessile oak wood after thermal modification | 121 |
| Nebojša Todorović, Zdravko Popović, Goran Milić, Marko Veizović | |
| Surface Wetting in Thermally Modified Beech Wood | 123 |
| Jozef Kúdela, Tomáš Andor, Rastislav Lagaňa, Csilla Csiha | |
| Improvement of the dimensional stability of wood by nanosilica treatments..... | 125 |
| Miklós Bak, Róbert Németh | |
| FTIR Analysis of Densified and Steamed Beech Wood | 127 |
| Radim Rousek | |
| Photodegradation of acetylated wood irradiated by xenon lamp and mercury-vapour lamp | 129 |
| Fanni Fodor ¹ , Róbert Németh | |
| Effect of High Intensity Microwaves to Hardwood Structure Modification and Its Applications in Technology | 131 |
| Grigory Torgovnikov and Peter Vinden | |

Parallel Session VI.

| | |
|--|------------|
| Hardwood in composites and engineered materials..... | 133 |
| Utilization of Lesser Known and Lesser Used Hardwoods for Decorative Veneers Purposes ... | 134 |
| Roman Réh | |
| Production of peeled veneer from black locust Pretreatment - Production - Properties | 136 |
| Peter Meinschmidt, Christian Dittrich, Dirk Berthold | |
| Factors influencing cold tack development during the production of birch plywood | 138 |
| Elfriede Hogger, Wolfgang Kantner, Johann Moser, Johannes Konnerth, Hendrikus W. G. van Herwijnen | |
| Heat transfer through the wood layers in the process of veneering of particle board in the hot presses..... | 140 |
| Vasil Merdzhánov, Dimitar Angelski | |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Physical Indicators of High-Density Fibreboards (HDF) Manufactured from Wood of Hard Broadleaved Species | 142 |
| Julia Mihajlova, Viktor Savov | |
| Machinability of birch compared to pine and wood-plastic composites in routing | 144 |
| Ossi Martikka, Timo Kärki | |

Parallel Session VII.

Surface coating and bonding characteristics of hardwoods 146

| | |
|---|-----|
| Surface quality and adherence of thermally compressed and finished birch wood | 147 |
| Pavlo Bekhta, Tomasz Krystofiak | |
| Glossiness of coated alder wood after artificial aging | 149 |
| Emilia-Adela Salca, Tomasz Krystofiak, Barbara Lis | |
| Improvement of ash (<i>Fraxinus Excelsior L.</i>) bonding quality with one component polyurethane adhesive and hydrophilic primer for load bearing application | 151 |
| Peter Niemz, Gaspard Clerc, Joseph Gabriel, Dario Salzgeber, Thomas Strahm, Frederic Pichelin | |
| Structural hardwood bonding and the impact of wood accessory compounds | 153 |
| Stefan Bockel, Steffen Harling, Johannes Konnerth, Peter Niemz, Frédéric Pichelin | |
| Adhesives for Fast Heated Bondlines in Structural Timber-Concrete-Composite Joints | 155 |
| Malte Mérono, Carola Link, Gregor Wisner, Elisabeth Stammen, Klaus Dilger, Artur Ginz, Werner Seim | |
| Birch for engineered timber products..... | 157 |
| David Obernosterer, Georg Jeitler, Manfred Augustin | |

Parallel Session VIII.

Hardwood in construction 159

| | |
|---|-----|
| Mechanical Properties Estimation by Non-destructive Testing of Irish Hardwood Round Timber from Thinnings for Construction Purposes | 160 |
| Daniel F. Llana, Ian Short, Conan O’Ceallaigh, Annette M. Harte | |
| Mechanical evaluation of French oak timber for use in construction: relation between origin of logs, properties of boards and behaviour of glued laminated products..... | 162 |
| Guillaume Legrand, Didier Reuling, Jean-Denis Lanvin, Morgan Vuillermoz, Carol Faye | |
| Mechanical characterization of French hardwood species for their integration in Eurocodes 5..... | 164 |
| Thibault Benistand, Laurent Bleron, Jean-françois Bocquet | |
| Strength grading of hardwood structural timber | 166 |
| P. Schlotzhauer, S. Bollmus, H. Militz | |
| Cross laminated timber development with Catalan sweet chestnut | 168 |
| Marcel Vilches-Casals, Eduard Correal-Mòdol, Carmen Iglesias-Rodríguez | |
| Innovative processing technologies of inferior beech assortments for the production of lamellas for glulam production “InnoBuLa” | 170 |
| Alexander Englberger, Matthias Zscheile | |

Parallel Session IX.

New hardwood product approaches 171

Technology Road Map for Hardwood in Lower Austria 172
Christian Hansmann, Christian Huber, Alfred Teischinger

Extended Utilization of Forest Production & Wood Material:
Hardwood Usage from Native Properties to Wood Modification 174
Peter Rademacher, Radim Rousek, Petr Pařil, Jan Baar, Stanislav Horníček, Zuzana
Paschová, Róbert Németh, Tamás Hofmann, Fanni Fodor, Gerald Koch, Andreja Kutnar

European Hardwoods Innovation Alliance: first results of a European survey on hardwoods
research needs and priorities 176
Barbara Rovere, Ana Slavec, Uwe Kies

Parallel Session X.

Product design and marketing initiatives 178

Thermal modification of lesser-known wood species with the hygrothermolytic
FirmoLin® process 179
Edo Kegel, Wim Willems

Eucalyptus globulus single family house in Spain after 16 years of exposure 181
David Lorenzo¹, Juan Fernández-Golfín, Manuel Touza, Alfonso Lozano

How to enrich forest information by the analysis of the hardwood selling prices from
public forests? 183
Jean-Michel Leban, Lucile Savagner, Jean-Baptiste Schwebel, Holger Wernsdorfer,
Jean-Daniel Bontemps