

A basic guide to softwoods and hardwoods

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The commonly-used terms "softwood" and "hardwood" are, in fact, rather misleading. For some softwoods can be quite hard – such as Southern Yellow Pine; and some hardwoods are softer than some softwoods – as in the hardwood Balsa, beloved of model-makers. Both softwoods and hardwoods offer a diverse range of options for different applications from construction to carpentry and there is always a suitable choice. So here are some of the most commercially important species from all over the world, which are generally available in the UK:

SOFTWOODS

Douglas Fir – A strong wood that is relatively clear of knots with a good decorative appearance; used in joinery, doors and heavy construction

Western Hemlock – A good all-purpose clear wood, less strong than Douglas fir Joinery; used for doors, joinery, furniture

Western Red Cedar – Lightweight, highly stable, non-resinous and durable timber, varying widely in colour; extensively used in cladding and shingles

Southern Yellow Pine – A hard plantation species from North and South America with high strength to weight ratio and good preservation treatment absorption; used in joinery, flooring and decking

Eastern White Pine – Commonly known as Quebec Yellow Pine is a highly stable wood, although less readily available in the UK than formerly; used wherever stability is a requirement, including furniture

Larch – An increasingly popular wood for its properties of durability and colour; used for cladding and boats

Whitewood (European Spruce) – General purpose, pale coloured softwood with a natural lustre, sometimes referred to as "deal" and normally requiring a coating; used throughout construction, panelling and cladding

Redwood (European Pine) – Yellowish-brown, resinous softwood; also used widely in joinery, flooring and furniture

Parana Pine – A straight grained light coloured softwood with red streaks, prized for its smooth clean finish and specification of long lengths and wide boards; used in stair treads and joinery

HARDWOODS temperate

Ash – Coarse grained and highly suitable for bending, sometimes with colour difference between the sapwood and heartwood; used in flooring, joinery and furniture

Oak – American and European oaks are traditionally the most popular hardwoods in North America and Europe respectively; used in construction, joinery, flooring and particularly in renovation and conservation projects

Beech – The most abundant hardwood growing in Europe, extremely hard; used in joinery, furniture and formerly flooring

Birch – Growing mainly in northern climes, widely used in plywood and although small in diameter is available in solid wood for small furniture and some joinery carcassing

Hard maple – A hardwood with a fine grain and superb finishing qualities; used for flooring, joinery and furniture

Tulipwood – A softwood substitute noted for stability, available in long lengths and often knot free; used in internal joinery

Black walnut – One of today's most fashionable and durable species, with a very fine finish; used in flooring, joinery and furniture

Cherry – Highly prized for its very fine surface finishing and warmth of colour, although there is a great difference in colour between the sap and heartwood; used in joinery and furniture

HARDWOODS tropical

Sapele – Dark red hardwood with distinctive stripe grain when quarter sawn, somewhat resistant to fungal attack; widely popular for use in joinery flooring

Iroko – Yellow-brown very durable wood with properties similar to teak; use in boatbuilding, construction, piling and marine work, external and internal joinery – particularly work surfaces - and cladding

Utile – Exhibits a wide range of colours and is moderately durable but resistant to preservation; used in external and internal joinery

Idigbo – Yellowish light brown wood with a medium weight; making it suitable for high class joinery and mouldings as well as flooring Joinery

Meranti – This huge tree produces very large sizes of sawn timber; used for windows, doors, internal and external joinery

Teak – One of the most durable of all timbers requiring no treatment against the elements; preferred for boatbuilding, decking, joinery, flooring & furniture

Balau – A very hard and durable brown coloured wood; suitable for construction & decking as well as piling and sea defences

Keruing – Often resinous hard wood with varying colour and plain grain; used in vehicle flooring, external joinery & construction

Massaranduba – A dark reddish brown wood; used widely in patio construction and decking

Ipe – A very strong, very durable timber which is hard but requires careful drying to avoid distortion; used for decking, flooring and external joinery

A great deal more technical information is available from various organisations, for which the following websites may help:

www.ahec-europe.org

www.americansoftwoods.com

www.trada.co.uk