

John Monaghan
Sitka Spruce
Picea sitchensis

I am going to tell you about a species of tree, rather than one individual specimen. We are fortunate to own a forest. In our forest we marvel at these trees, which grow straight and fast, are windfirm, tolerate as much rain as we can throw at it, and yet look majestic and impressive.

When I was a young boy, I enjoyed building model planes, with a particular favourite: The De Havilland Mosquito. As a youngster I also learnt to play the guitar. I did not realise that these two disparate activities would have something important in common. The Mosquito which did such stalwart work in WW2 was mainly built of high-quality Sitka spruce which was imported in millions of board lengths during the war. And the sounding board of my guitar was made of the same wood, the preferred material for good quality instruments. I had been totally unaware of the close relationship of the Sitka spruce to my childhood recreations, and my great love of this tree continues to give pleasure in my older years. This wonderful tree continues to give so much to our everyday lives, I feel it deserves a better appreciation of its qualities.

The Sitka Spruce may seem an unusual choice at a time when it is fashionable to denigrate all alien specimens of tree in our woodlands, yet we are totally happy to fill our gardens and houses with plants from all over the world.

Sitka Spruce, (*Picea sitchensis*), is the mainstay of commercial forestry, it is our most valuable construction timber and a great supplier of heat light and energy for our homes and industries.

During the 18th century land owners realised the need for home grown timber of all sorts. European countries were expanding their navies and needing to house increasing populations so there was pressure on imports. Britain had low single figure tree coverage and the need for a rapid expansion of tree growing was recognised. Major plantings of European Larch, Scots pine, European silver fir and Norway spruce markedly expanded the forest cover, particularly in Scotland.

Sitka spruce, originally from the temperate rain forests of the North West coast of North America, is named after the Sitka Sound in Southern Alaska. It is the Alaskan State Tree. First introduced into Britain in the 1830s, it was probably grown from seed sent by David Douglas of Douglas Fir fame. Douglas named the tree *Pinus Menziesii* after his predecessor who had sent specimens back to London in a previous expedition.

Incidentally, the first major use of Sitka spruce was as an antiscorbutic, prepared as 'Spruce Beer' by Captain Cook, in order to ward off the dreaded scurvy which beset all long distance voyages.

Douglas, however, observed that the conditions the Sitka spruce was growing in were very similar to the conditions in Scotland, an observation which would probably not have been made by someone from a more amenable climate. Sadly, Douglas was accidentally killed in Hawaii, after falling into a pit trap for wild cattle. There was a wild beast in the trap!

Douglas' collections of Sitka seed arrived in and around 1830 and were distributed widely to Horticultural societies and Scottish estates that had helped fund the expedition. The first trees grown from these seeds were planted in 1834 and one of the first trees planted is still growing well on the Curraghmore estate, County Cork. It is said to be the second tallest tree in Ireland.

A lot of the antipathy to the Sitka spruce is generated by it being eternally compared to our native ancient woodlands, mainly oak and ash. We must remember that our Sitka plantations are still in the juvenile stage of development. The trees have not reached that stage of maturity which allows some to die, some to be broken and form a deep fertile understorey. Sitka has been used as a vital short-term crop of about forty-five years when it is at its most valuable for milling and making into construction timber. Changes in management of forests using techniques of more selective felling are allowing the development of uneven age coups, (Continuous Cover Forestry), are allowing us to see that the more ancient Sitka forests have just as diverse an eco-structure as our so-called native woodlands. Now that we are applying the same investigative assessments to our conifer forests, we are finding that far from being deserts, they are dynamic lively centres of wildlife of all sorts. As mixed age woodlands they develop a diversity of plant and animal life which is truly remarkable.

Even more interesting is a study carried out in South Wales in a Forestry Commission Sitka woodland, which has shown that using the standard clear fell, replant and grow to maturity cycle that each stage in the process is characterised by remarkable increases in a wide variety of birds and other wild life.

In our forest we are keeping a large number in our LTRs, (long term retention) groups so that our grandchildren, and their grandchildren, can appreciate this magnificent tree which does so much for us. It will also allow us to see a truly ancient woodland of Sitka develop all the wonderful elements of a temperate rain forest.

In the photograph you can see some of our larger Sitka spruce. If you look very closely at the lower centre, you can see the owner of the forest at the base of one of the trees. She is the same age as the tree which has another four to seven hundred years to live. Trees do get our short lives into perspective.

