

Let's stop bleating about the bushes...

It's not just the great mound of delicious, sun-warmed, deep blue, wild Wakelyns Agroforestry cherries that stimulated these thoughts. Recently, in Northern Ireland, I joined the 'Farm Woodland Forum' (the re-named Agroforestry Forum) for annual discussions and demonstrations on all aspects of temperate agroforestry – including new policy developments.

As climate change starts to bite, the advantages of agroforestry become increasingly obvious (at least to me and the other Forum members). For instance, there was talk of the ways in which agroforestry on flood plains could help delay flooding and restrict damage when fast flooding does occur. And there's increasing evidence of the ways in which trees in agroforestry systems can help reduce, not only nitrate leaching, but leaching of pesticides in non-organic systems.

Jim McAdam and Gerald Hoppe confirmed how, last year, when even Northern Ireland was really sunny, the silvopastoral systems at Loughgall provided really welcome shade for sheep and cattle. It was also impressive how an ash-based system, planted in 1989 and now with major trees and shading, nevertheless still provides early and late bite for the farm stock because of the particularly short shade season with ash. Jim also confirmed that, as the ash matured, the pasture composition adjusted to more shade-tolerant species such as *Poa trivialis*, rather than the original perennial ryegrass.

When the chips are down

Much of this particular meeting was directed to willow and willow chip production for local heating schemes. One novel and exciting idea was the push to get a few farmers to come together to sell, not wood chip, but heat. This involves, for example, the farmer group getting together with a local builder developing a small housing estate. The group could try to persuade the builder to install woodchip boilers in individual houses to provide a local woodchip market. But this would be very expensive and inefficient – big boilers produce a much better return. A far better idea is to persuade the builder that the farmer group would take on the purchase, installation and running of a single central boiler unit, which would provide cheap heat for the householders and an assured woodchip market for the farmers.

As these and other kinds of woodchip market grow, there is increasing interest in using sewage sludge and slurry in various ways to apply to the willow to increase biomass yield. The protagonists claim that this can be more effective than reed bed systems in cleaning up such materials. The main argument, however, is that this provides an acceptable way for re-cycling human and farm “wastes”, avoiding the usual concerns about applying such materials directly to food crops, or even to fruit and nut trees.

Multifunctionality

Certainly at Wakelyns Agroforestry we're delighted to hear that modern woodchip boiler installations are becoming increasingly common locally. These will complement our willow alley system perfectly as we move to independent, renewable energy for the whole farm, with some extra available for a lucky neighbour. Importantly, as the arguments about producing plant materials for energy become more heated, I believe the case for achieving this through alley cropping systems becomes even stronger. The key point is that wood produced for energy in alley cropping is multifunctional – the trees or coppice provide many services for the crops or animals in the alleys, while they are being produced and managed. This is very different from a 'plantation' crop, grown with only one function in mind, thermal energy, which then detracts totally from the potential of that land to produce food.

Agroforestry and policy

So, if agroforestry is so amazing in its potential for producing food, materials, energy, diversity, disease and pest control, habitat, protection for animals, man and plants, and, not least, deep pleasure as our visitors regularly confirm, why isn't everybody doing it? The short answer is policy. Nowhere in the Single Farm Payments scheme or the new Stewardship schemes (ELS, OELS, HLS) (or even in my spellchecker) is the word agroforestry even mentioned. But, there may be changes on the way, albeit slowly.

The first positive point is that the EU does now recognise agroforestry, even if Defra does not. And Greece has become the first country to take advantage of Article 44, establishment of agroforestry systems, within Council Regulation 1698/2005 on rural development. Some awareness of this has emerged in the draft English Rural Development Plan for 2007-2013, but it has been sidelined obscurely into parkland at the expense of support for the targeted creation of new woodland and improved maintenance of existing woodland.

And there's the rub. Development of agroforestry systems is not something that should be competing with parkland or the development of new woodland – it serves a largely different set of purposes. We badly need an appreciation of the point that agroforestry, by promoting positive interaction between agriculture and forestry to the mutual benefit of both, represents a crucially important tool in the development of sustainable resilience against the growing variability of global climate change. Got that? Phew. Now back to those cherries.

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