



Why thin woodlands?

Trees grow throughout their lives and need more living space as time goes by. Under natural conditions competition results in some trees becoming suppressed and these weakened trees may eventually die. As managers we seek to influence the composition of the woodland by removing trees competing with those which we favour. In this way we can enhance the timber quality and promote the best conservation and amenity trees. It may be possible to use these thinnings for firewood or other products.

In identifying which trees to favour it is important to look for vigorous, straight upright stems of the right species such as oak, ash or cherry. The selected trees, which will eventually produce the best timber, should ideally be pruned of low branches and should be reasonably evenly spread through the wood. Lop and top can be left on the ground to decay and return nutrients into the soil. Do not burn material as this is likely to lead to damage to the surrounding trees which you wish to keep!

Trees can also be selected for wildlife value and might include leaving rare species such as whitebeam or wild service. This wildlife interest generally increases with the age of the trees. This could mean that trees with nest holes for birds, or splits which might be good roost sites for bats, or decaying trees full of fungi and insects, are retained, where it is safe to do so. Standing dead wood can also be left as valuable habitat away from boundaries, buildings or roads. Other trees of human interest or historical value should also be retained such as boundary pollards.

Thinning operations are a matter of judgement and experience helps. Favoured trees should normally have full rounded crowns which can bathe in sunlight. Thin out competitors

before the favoured trees become over topped. Trees will grow faster when they also have at least some clear space around the sides of the canopy into which they can grow.

Look for patches of clear sky between the crowns of trees in summer. Some competition from the sides is preferred as this helps suppress unwanted low branches and increases the length of the utilisable stem. Trees grow best when they have mutual shelter and protection from the wind. On exposed sites thinning should be gradual to reduce the risk of windthrow.

Generally thinning is best done little and often. In small woods it may be convenient to remove say 5% of stems annually for firewood, but if contractors are employed they may carry out a 25% thinning once every five years or so to make the most of their machinery. You should avoid thinning during the nesting season from late March through to July. Dry ground conditions in late summer or frozen ground in winter may help extraction of logs and reduce the damage to the soil.

Note the controls on felling trees; you may need a Felling Licence from the Forestry Commission, or other permission if your wood is also an SSSI, is the subject of a Tree Preservation Order or is within a conservation area. Caution felling is a dangerous business, requiring a high level of skill and should only be practised after appropriate training.

Adapted from a leaflet used on thinning workshops by David Rees of the Oxfordshire Woodland Project phone 01993 814140.



David Rees leads discussion about the thinning and pruning of trees with volunteers in Thame. One of a series of workshops organised jointly by the Chiltern & Oxfordshire Woodland Projects.

