

Paulownia plantation experiences and profitable timber production

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*(With acknowledgement and thanks to Richard Moore, Golden Cedar Limited,
[ph.0411 202040] for data and discussion of timber utilisation trials).*

Abstract

There has been both hype from, and disparaging criticism of, the emerging Paulownia timber plantation industry in Australia. The author rejects both extremes, and describes growing experiences, rational silvicultural models, and timber evaluation trials which indicate realistic returns should be available from a well-managed plantation, subject to some risks. Scale, location, management and genotype are essential factors for achieving high growth rates and commercial yields. The value of gross timber sales from a 16 year rotation with thinning is likely to be nearly twice that from an unthinned 10 year rotation.

Intensive skilled management and specific land qualities are required, and these factors contribute to high growing costs which will probably act as a constraint on major plantation expansion for some time. The industry will be led by managers of collective investment plantations who have sufficient volume to undertake their own processing and marketing. Small scale growers are unlikely to be able to sell logs to pine and eucalypt mills at equivalent stumpage until the product has had more widespread evaluation and consumer approval.

There is a potential to harvest at least 400 and possibly more than 1000 hectares per annum as a partial replacement for imported timbers, with current commercial-quality plantings estimated to be no more than 250 ha per annum. Market opportunities are seen to be in the light furniture and mouldings sector, and timber from young trees (<10 years) has already been made into sample products and favourably assessed by manufacturers. Timber processors face some technical challenges in preventing sapstain, discolouration and avoiding surface bruising.

*Paper presented to Australian Forest Growers Conference Lismore NSW 6-9 July 1998
(Revised Sept 2000)*

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