



Opinion... Redefine the aims of tree planting

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Redefine the aims of tree planting

Sound bites containing “millions”, whether it relates to pounds or trees, can be quite convincing, but how much depth is there behind the headline figures? Not a lot, it would seem, if present performance is anything to go by.

Although there are pockets of urban tree-planting excellence around the UK, these are often the exception rather than the rule, and the overall track record is not impressive. Tree planting on new developments can read like a catalogue of disasters, frequently characterised by dead and dying trees unable to deliver the green promises so freely pledged in the hunt for planning consents.

Uninformed design often fails to provide the species diversity needed for resilience against climate change and new pests. Poor-quality trees from the nurseries are frequently unable to flourish. Bad planting practice by contractors is common and even good-quality trees struggle to survive. Routine but essential maintenance — watering, weeding and formative pruning — is regularly absent, weakening already stressed trees beyond the point of recovery. Inadequate enforcement of planning conditions means that dead and dying trees may never be replaced.

Compounding these problems, highway authorities continue to charge for adopting new trees, but these trees pay back much more in benefits than they ever cost. Dropping the charges altogether would remove a significant barrier to urban greening. These are all serious flaws in a system that is not working for local communities or the wider national best interest.

Out of town, there is also plenty of scope to improve. New planting will never meet headline political targets, but fencing out grazing animals to encourage natural regeneration is cheap and it works. Timber should be a by-product of modern re-forestation, not the reason. We need biomass, so why waste time controlling squirrels? Plant species they do not gnaw, and value any “damage” for what it is — extremely rich ecological habitat. It is time to move on from monocultures, so why not mix species and canopy layers together, creating more diverse and resilient woods?

Contrary to the political narrative to immediately ramp up the amount of new planting, how about a short moratorium to review the options? Use that time to pause and stand back to redefine the objectives of planting, review what works well and what is failing, design an effective plan and implement it for success

Knee-jerk responses never did work very well, so maybe it is time for a more intelligent approach.

