

## Garden furniture

If you plan on upgrading your garden habitat with new outdoor furniture, try to take account of the impact you'll have on the rest of the planet, says **Simon Birch**.

**WITH SPRING HERE**, many of us can look forward to spending more time in our gardens and backyards enjoying the warmer weather. If you feel you'll need to invest in some new outdoor furniture in order to benefit from the lengthening evenings, don't forget that there is an environmental impact associated with whatever you decide to buy.

Wooden tables and chairs will be many people's first choice, but these can be made from hardwoods sourced from tropical rainforests, most probably in South-east Asia. A report published by the Environmental Investigation Agency

(EIA) in 2008 uncovered evidence that businesses in Vietnam were illegally obtaining hardwoods from Laos to process into outdoor furniture – and that these products were being imported into the UK.

Assuming you don't want to buy furniture that may have been illegally harvested or processed, then the majority of DIY stores and the larger garden centres increasingly only sell furniture (and other wooden products) that has been certified as sustainably grown by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) (see box, *far right*). Simply looking for the FSC logo can solve a lot of ethical dilemmas.

But wood isn't the only material that garden furniture can be made from – plastic and metal are also commonly used as well, and buying second-hand furniture or a set made from reclaimed wood are further options. In the tests (*right*), we aim to assess the environmental impacts of all the different ways in which you can buy garden furniture.

One final point: we recognise that the winning set is probably more expensive than many people will be prepared to pay, which is why we have a 'recommended' product, too. It is impossible to provide easy solutions on an issue such as this, but we hope our research provides a useful starting point in your search for an ethical summer relaxing in the garden.

resource implications of each material; and are there any other environmental issues to consider. Secondly, Simon wanted to find out exactly what the carbon footprint was of the different types of garden furniture. These calculations were carried out for us by the sustainability consultancy Best Foot Forward ([www.bestfootforward.com](http://www.bestfootforward.com)).



### 4-seater cast aluminium set

#### SECOND-HAND

Source: eBay [www.ebay.co.uk](http://www.ebay.co.uk) Cost: £85

» **Environmental impact** Hard to quantify, but there are wider issues: just as many people would not buy second-hand fur, others might balk at buying second-hand furniture made from an endangered hardwood tree? Also be aware that many companies use eBay to sell new hardwood furniture that isn't FSC-certified. Free second-hand furniture is also available from Freecycle ([www.freecycle.org](http://www.freecycle.org)), but it tends to go very fast.

» **Carbon footprint** 2kg CO<sub>2</sub>. This assumes a 10-year lifespan of the aluminium set. **Scores well for carbon footprint, but tricky ethical issues remain.** **7/10**



### Madison 4-seater patio set with parasol

#### WOOD

Source: [www.homebase.co.uk](http://www.homebase.co.uk); Cost: £399.99

» **Environmental impact** Made from mixed-source FSC-certified Shorea, a hardwood that grows mostly in Indonesia and Malaysia, this product is let down because it is not clear what percentage comes from uncertified sources. Other FSC products available include plantation eucalyptus (from Focus DIY), which is a good alternative.

» **Carbon footprint** 62kg CO<sub>2</sub>. **The FSC is a good scheme, but it's a shame some products are 'mixed-source'. The carbon footprint is quite high.** **7/10**



### Pressed steel 4-seater set

#### METAL

Source: Argos [www.argos.co.uk](http://www.argos.co.uk); Cost: £69.99

» **Environmental impact** China's steel industry, the biggest in the world, has a poor environmental record. Problems include the devastating impact of strip-mining the iron ore and coal needed to make the steel and pollution from the manufacturing process.

» **Carbon footprint** 76kg CO<sub>2</sub>. Steel production is highly energy intensive, resulting in the biggest carbon footprint of all the garden furniture that I looked at. Furniture made from aluminium would also have a high carbon footprint.

**The impact and carbon footprint of metal furniture is very high.** **1/10**



### 4 seats & round table

#### PLASTIC

Source: Argos [www.argos.co.uk](http://www.argos.co.uk); Cost: £59.95

» **Environmental impact** Plastic garden furniture is made from polypropylene, which, like all plastics, is derived from non-renewable fossil fuels. Though polypropylene can be recycled, there are very few facilities that do this in the UK, so broken and damaged plastic tables and chairs will tend to end up in landfill.

» **Carbon footprint** 56kg CO<sub>2</sub>. Plastic's relatively high score reflects its energy-intensive production.

**Despite its few direct environmental impacts, plastic production is a significant emitter of greenhouse gases.** **4/10**

### 4 teak chairs & table

#### RECLAIMED WOOD

Source: Arbor Vetum [www.arborvetum.co.uk](http://www.arborvetum.co.uk); Cost: £1,295

» **Environmental impact** The Arbor Vetum product has been certified by the FSC as being 100 per cent reclaimed, with the wood coming from India and South-east Asia. If the product you look at doesn't have this promise, then the wood could come from unsustainable sources. Arbor

Vetum says that it salvages old teak timbers from derelict buildings.

» **Carbon footprint** 20kg CO<sub>2</sub>. The second-lowest score – virtually all the CO<sub>2</sub> can be attributed to shipping the wood to the UK.

**This product is a good use of a valuable resource that would otherwise be wasted, with a low carbon footprint. The only (considerable) downside is the high cost.** **8/10**



### NOT ALL WOOD IS GOOD

Many wood-based products have an impact on tropical rainforests.

» **Flooring** One of the key woods used for flooring is merbau, a hardwood found in commercial volumes only in West Papua (the Indonesian half of New Guinea). The Environmental Investigation Agency has shown that many of the companies selling merbau flooring in the UK are unable to prove that the wood came from legal sources. One solution is to look for FSC-certified flooring.

» **Musical instruments** The majority of wood used to make musical instruments is currently not harvested sustainably. Tropical hardwood species such as rosewoods and ebonies, for example, which provide soundboards for guitars and violins, are now endangered. The industry is only starting to address the issue and there are very few instruments made from FSC-certified wood. Gordon Smith Guitars is one of the few companies to use only FSC wood. ☎ 01302 531711; [www.gordonsmithguitars.com](http://www.gordonsmithguitars.com)

» **Windows and doors** Many hardwood windows and doors come from uncertified forests or plantations. One option is to ask a local joinery firm if they can source wood that is certified. Alternatively, contact the Green Building Store, which sells only 100 per cent FSC European oak and European pine windows and doors. ☎ 01484 461705; [www.greenbuildingstore.co.uk](http://www.greenbuildingstore.co.uk)

» **Indoor furniture** Environmental groups claim that up to 45 per cent of furniture in the UK is made using wood from illegal forest sources. The majority is manufactured in China, with illegal wood coming from the Amazon, Russia and the Congo Basin. The solution? Again, FSC-certified products are the best protection you have against buying products that damage wildlife habitats.

### CERTIFICATION SCHEMES

There are two main consumer-based certification schemes for wood products.

» **The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)** is the UK's most widely recognised forest certification scheme. Products labelled as coming from 'mixed sources' can be made with just 70 per cent FSC wood. ☎ 01686 413916; [www.fsc.org](http://www.fsc.org)

» **The Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC)** is an umbrella organisation that sets the standards for third-party forest certification schemes. It claims to have overall responsibility for the certification of more than 200m hectares of forest all around the world. ☎ 0114 307 2334; [www.pefc.org](http://www.pefc.org)



Stop the rot: don't buy wooden furniture made from teak that has been unsustainably harvested.

### THE TEST



**THE EXPERT**  
Simon Birch has been

writing environmental and ethically themed stories for national newspapers and magazines for 20 years, and has contributed features on ethical finance and energy-saving gadgets for this 'On Test' section.

### HOW HE TESTED THEM

Simon looked at five different types of garden furniture: FSC-certified wood; metal; plastic; reclaimed wood and second-hand.

There were two factors to consider: first, the different products' direct impact on wildlife and the environment. For example, was any habitat destroyed or pollution created in the production of a particular material and what are the