

Letter to the Editor

Ballynakillew
Ballinrobe
Co Mayo

Sir

In the early 1990s a recent plantation of Sitka spruce, located in that region of Ireland which has come to be known as the mid-west, was found not to be thriving as would have been expected; in fact it was adjudged a failure. It transpired that the site of the plantation was peaty, underlain by shelly marl.

The condition of some scattered plants of ash suggested that a replanting with that species might prove interesting, and that suggestion was implemented.

Being in the vicinity recently I took the opportunity to revisit the site. I found a crop of thicket-stage ash which appeared healthy and vigorous. A thorough survey of the site was not possible, personal decrepitude being a factor in that regard.

Neither could crop quality be fully assessed, the crop being in full leaf, but what could be seen suggested that the overall quality was no more than moderate.

There are several possible reasons for poor crop quality in these circumstances:

- i. A deficiency of potassium can lead to loss of apical dominance. Some surviving Sitka spruce trees on the margin of the plantation showed signs of potassium deficiency.
- ii. Frost can cause serious forking.
- iii. Infestation by ash bud moth (*Prays fraxinella*) kills buds thus causing forking.

Whatever the cause of the sub-optimal quality the relative success of this crop suggests that further survey, followed perhaps by positive experimentation, may eventually suggest a possible solution to the hitherto intractable problem of marl sites.

It may be noted that the problem of 'forestry failures due to shell-marl soil and related conditions' featured in the 1998 Annual Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Yours sincerely
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