

IMPORT REPLACEMENT

a concise report by James S. Lawrence of TGG ~ toadgully.com.au

Australian growers of Paulownia are looking to import replacement for their future marketing of the timber from these fast growing East Asian trees. The low density, knot-free and decoratively grained timber, known as Kiri, is a potential substitute for a range of species from overseas forests.



Australia has a trade deficit in forest products of around 2 billion dollars each year. While about two thirds of this is paper and related products, much of the remainder is timber or timber products which could be replaced with Paulownia timber. For example, Meranti from the rainforests of Malaysia, which generally fetches a higher price than softwoods, could be replaced with Kiri wood for uses such as furniture, window frames and mouldings. Meranti prices are expected to remain buoyant due to global restrictions on the availability of tropical rainforest timber.

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The Australian plantation timber industry is dominated by radiata pine and blue gums, most of the latter being grown for paper pulp. These species earned their position with attributes such as relatively simple management, and high yields of timber of a type required to fill the bulk of commercial applications. The gap in Australia's ability to be self sufficient in timber is in the area of higher value, high grade timbers for interior use.

Paulownia trees require highly intensive management and are well suited to agroforestry. Harvest can commence from 8 to 12 years of age, however if left to grow older the quality will continue to improve. Higher density timber from older trees is in strong demand in Japan where it has long been prized for Kiri Tansu, traditional chests of drawers.



The greatest potential for fast grown Australian Paulownia is in the mouldings and joinery industry. Uses including architraves, skirting boards, window and picture frames, shutters and venetian blinds, wall panelling and cabinet making, as well as motor homes, surf boards and boat building which all capitalise on the timber's good working qualities, lightness and stability. As a pale timber, Paulownia can be stained to imitate a wide range of other timbers including western red cedar, oak, mahogany and even blackwood. By substituting plantation grown Paulownia in the place of rainforest timbers such as ramin, calantas and meranti, builders and manufacturers could satisfy increasingly green consumers. The environmental benefits of this tree extend to the potential for intercropping, soil improvement and carbon sequestration. They are also highly effective as a sink for waste water, with the ability to rapidly convert nutrient rich effluent into useful timber.

