



# A toast to death and *Phytophthora ramorum*

*A diagnosis of Phytophthora ramorum in your woodland need not be all bad news, writes Peter Dreghorn.*

**T**wo routes to human happiness are having enough peak experiences to be glad to be alive, and helping others to have them. So it was with the building of “Root 66”, our log cabin, thus named because the topping-out ceremony was on my 66th birthday. With it, we put down roots in our ten-acre silver birch and willow wet wood. You might also recognise the play on the famous rock song, Route 66.

As well as money, it has given good experiences to others: TreeSurv (see advert on page 43) learned cabin building skills; our tree surgeon son felled the trees; Davy Cairns, tree planter, used the cabin whilst planting 400 native trees. This peak experience, for me, has its origins in the Foxfire books, from the seventies, which I read whilst toying with the notion of self-sufficiency. Foxfire is a remarkable record of old pioneering country lives in North America, with chapters on building cabins without using machines. For 40 years I harboured an ambition to build a log cabin and here it is. Reforesting Scotland’s A Thousand Huts campaign and I have mutually benefitted; I became an avid supporter of that movement,

supplying pictures and feedback whilst I was undertaking a project which fitted exactly the rationale of the campaign.

## **Opportunity**

We had a remnant population of 50 European larch in the wood, 52 years old but under a Forestry Commission felling order because a handful were infected with *Phytophthora ramorum*. Prior to that we were part of the vast army of retirees who had purchased small, uncommercial woodlands from woodlands.co.uk. Our purchase was motivated by living in the treeless landscape of the Upper Clyde moorlands and being involved in both Carrifran and Corehead woodland restoration projects.

It was lovely to have the woodland as an environmental hobby and carbon offset, but overnight we became serious foresters, with the first task of how we could get tractors in and timber out. We met with the usual Forestry Commission bureaucracy of asking eight different people to grant access through their adjacent land. Our wood is wet and off-road, and most of the trees were felled into a ravine and there was only

permission granted to mill the larch with registered millers. We needed a nice wee off-the-peg hut in which to camp, but we decided to build with the felled larch instead.

After much open-mouthed gazing at the sheer volume of wood, the off-cuts of which have kept our central heating going for two years, we met with TreeSurv, a family-run woodland management business, and Doug Roper. Doug was raised in the wilds of Australia where you did most things from scratch. He was very pleased to embark on a creative building project. TreeSurv was involved in planting hundreds of thousands of trees in the Southern Uplands, and staff were excited to do something other than putting endless trees, tubes and stakes out on the landscape.

## **Hurdles overcome**

We met in a local hotel and drew pictures, sizing the cabin to be the same as our living room, with logs short enough to be two-man handled (ha, ha!). We decided that the first two logs should be resting on a gravel trench lined with plastic, with the next logs at right angles off the

ground. Then came full-length log roof beams, a veranda and chain-sawed window holes. The cabin was to be lined with larch planks, alternately placed, not straight edged but following the tree trunk taper. This design feature is aesthetically very effective and followed our rule of every piece of wood to be sourced

Alaskan sawmill, a large chainsaw with a special guide for straight edges. During the previous year, I had discussed milling by chainsaw and every person I spoke to said it takes too long and is not really feasible. Whilst time consuming, it is a remarkably accurate process and suits a wet woodland; the on-site planking operation went really well. The key is a special rip chain, which is designed to cut with the grain as opposed to a normal chain, which cuts against, and can process wet wood more quickly than a conventional chain. In the summer months, sons and grandchildren came to play, collecting sawdust, making bows and arrows, and playing in the wood. My biggest planning error was to assume that the logs could be man-handled by three men; the weight of each log meant that a tractor-powered winch attached to a tree was necessary.

**Lessons learned**

The builders camped out during the four-week build, knocking up peripheral constructions, benches, tables and a toilet. Finally, the roof was attached. Since completion we have built a wood store with a planted roof, installed a small stove and flue, photo voltaic lights, shelves, hammocks and enough living utensils for any Air BnB. Local wildlife, mice, wasps and even an owl, are delighted with their new accommodation.

Building anything is fun but there is no substitute for using growing materials from your own wood instigated by a disastrous tree disease. With its solid construction, colour, smell and sense of place, the cabin has impacted on our lives practically and emotionally. We have learned that

European larch, regarded as a poor softwood, is actually a long-lasting strong timber because of its high resin content; untreated fence posts can last for 50 years.

Making a place of shelter in a wood can encourage management and ecological restoration rather than neglect and destruction. Although I am privileged to have this opportunity to play, it has inspired us to take woodland restoration a stage further, use a natural resource, take our place in the wood and encourage others to do the same. One also has to be very determined and confront contradicting advice from others; “larch is no good for building or firewood”, “it’s too difficult to mill with a chainsaw”, “the 1,000 huts campaign won’t work”, were some of the cautionary comments we didn’t heed.

We plan this year to place a pond liner on the roof and cover it with turf, encouraging biodiversity. My log cabin building continues, by proxy, as a member of Corehead Steering Group (see page 16). I suggested that the wonderful larch copses there be used for building our new education building, and invited staff from Borders Forest Trust (BFT) to see Root 66. They were suitably inspired to fell enough for a building and it now sits seasoning in a tantalising pile at Corehead. Just one of the copses has a thousand straight, usable larch trees of a similar age to mine. Root 66 also encouraged a BFT member of staff to go off and live her dream in the Highlands.

[wellbeingsolutions.org.uk](http://wellbeingsolutions.org.uk)  
[carrifran.org.uk](http://carrifran.org.uk)  
[riverannan.org](http://riverannan.org)  
[bordersforesttrust.org](http://bordersforesttrust.org)

*Peter Dreghorn has been involved in reforesting the Southern Uplands for 17 years, helping both Carrifran and Corehead projects with education, tree planting, fundraising, bracken management and citizen science. His latest projects include Moffat Community Woodland buyout, Restoring the Annan Water (RAW) and a specially designed and built domestic compost toilet, called “Travelling Loo C”, all of which will feature in the 2016 Reforesting Scotland Annual Gathering, from 7-9 October in Moffat.*



from the felled larch. When the estimate was issued, we realised that the cost would be double that of an off-the-peg cabin! To get an idea of timber processing costs, it took one man a week to debark the logs by hand, costing £500. Many of the trees had to be felled down a slope, so would be dragged out by a 50-year-old tractor which was available locally for hire (incidentally, another TreeSurv dream realised).

Milling the wood for planks took a while too as it had to be done by an

Clockwise from top left: Brenda Dreghorn home maker; Joe Dreghorn Tree Surgeon; Treesurv and Doug Roper winning the big logs.