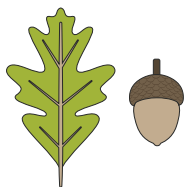Timbers for woodwork use fall into two main classes – softwoods and hardwoods.
The terms 'hardwood' and 'softwood' for timber classification date back to the days of the village carpenter, whose experience was limited to a few locally grown timbers.

Softwoods

These are timbers from trees such as pine, fir, spruce and larch. They are known as conifers because their seeds are enclosed in cones. These trees have long needle-like green leaves, each of which lives for four or five years. Because they are replaced a few at a time, the trees always appear green and are often called evergreens, though larch is an exception. The structure of a softwood is simple, and the wood is usually resinous, soft, and easy to work, although some softwoods, such as yew, are quite hard.

Hardwoods

These come from trees which have broad leaves such as oak, ash, beech and mahogany and are to be found in the warmer regions of the temperate zones. They are known as deciduous trees because they shed their leaves in the autumn. This shredding of leaves prevents loss of water through their leaves in the winter when their roots are unable to absorb moisture from the cold ground. The seeds of deciduous trees are enclosed in fruit.

The structure of a hardwood is complex and the timber usually hard and a little difficult to work. Some hardwoods such as balsa and willow are quite soft.

Uses

Softwood is in great demand for building work such as roofs, staircases, floors and general construction work, and is used in much greater quantities than the harder, heavier and more expensive hardwoods which are normally used for high quality joinery work and furniture making.

Common Softwoods and Hardwoods used in the UK

Softwoods			Hardwoods	
Redwood	Hemlock	Western White Pine	European English Oak	Elm
Cedar	Parana Pine	Sitka		Sycamore
Western Red Douglas	Pitch Pine	Spruce	Beech	Birch
Douglas Fir	Quebec Yellow Pine		Ash	Walnut