



REPORT

20 POINTS TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOU BUY FURNITURE FOR THE GARDEN

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1. What do you want it to do? Most people buy furniture for their garden because they want to use it. Dining and entertaining alfresco is such a pleasure in the surroundings of a beautiful garden. Breakfast in the garden is a delightful start to a warm spring or summer day. When not beautifully dressed with tableware, flowers, etc. your dining set should still look good. Taking a break from the gardening is so easy if there is a seat or chair nearby. Others have a special spot and they know that “a small garden seat would look lovely under the cherry tree”. This is also a sound reason because garden furniture should always be an attractive feature, especially as it will be on show for many years.
2. Will you have time to use it? This is an important consideration especially if you are a busy person or an enthusiastic gardener with an endless list of tasks to be getting on with. However, actually having a chair or a bench permanently in the garden will mean that you are tempted to sit down for a while, perhaps to read that article about creating a rockery, while enjoying a cup of coffee. The same applies to a dining table and chairs - they will be there all ready and this will make it so easy to bring out a meal or snack. Furniture which can be left out in your garden all the year round will give you so many more opportunities to relax in and enjoy your garden.
3. Will it look as though it belongs in the garden? Garden furniture in white plastic is carefully designed to be comfortable, but standing on a lawn against a colourful flower bed it does not always look in keeping with its surroundings. Metal or metal and wood combination furniture is made in many fine designs and may be right for you. The same is true of some of the more avant-garde, ultra modern designs, although these may look rather dated in years to come and comfort is often sacrificed for looks. Traditional designs have stood the test of time. They still look right today in gardens where they may have originally been placed fifty years ago. Wood undoubtedly looks appropriate in any garden setting, after all it's in good company! A wood that weathers attractively actually looks better and better as the years go by. Your garden furniture should be decorative as well as useful. How many photographs of beautiful gardens in gardening magazines feature plastic or *new* wooden furniture?
4. Other materials. Plastic becomes permanently discoloured by the weather after a time; it becomes brittle and prone to cracking after a few years and because of its lightness is easily blown across the garden by the wind. Woven plastic furniture requires cushions all the time which means that the cushions must be brought out and put away every time the furniture is used. This rather defeats the always-immediately-ready-for-use aspect. Tables of this material require glass tops to avoid crumbs and spillages accumulating in the weave. Cast iron or aluminium are used to create some very ornate furniture; iron being immensely heavy. They feel very hard in use and crockery is more easily broken on them. The more intricate the design the more dirt traps are created and these can be difficult to clean effectively. Stone is used for some garden furniture and, of course, stone looks lovely in a garden and will last virtually for ever. It is not easy to move if you decide you would like it in a different position, it feels very cold and stone tables are very unforgiving to glasses and crockery not handled with care. Some beautiful mosaic and tiled tables have come onto the market in recent years. These create an attractive Mediterranean touch in patios and gardens. In the British winter weather water can sometimes penetrate beneath the tiles and cause them to lift or crack when it freezes. Again, tiles and mosaics present a higher risk to crockery.

5. Comfort. Almost any chair or seat can be made comfortable with cushions, but furniture which lives in the garden throughout the year will not have its cushions on it all the time so it should be comfortable without a cushion. Comfort is created primarily by correct angles, curvature in the right places and width. It is amazing how a garden seat whose back is too upright by only a few degrees is far less comfortable than one which is correctly angled. Curvature, too needs to be deep enough; a little too shallow and the chair will not feel comfortable at all. Steamer chairs are a very good case in point. They all look very similar, but sitting in them (without a cushion) proves how different they can feel. Width is obviously a compromise in dining chairs where it has to be limited to allow sufficient seating around a table, but in armchairs and recliners with arms the user should not feel any restriction due to narrowness between the arms. Depth of seat is also a factor. A seat which is too shallow to give support under the thighs near the knees will be less comfortable than one which is more generously proportioned.
6. Longevity. No furniture for the garden is cheap nowadays, but a garden is for long term enjoyment so the furniture that forms part of its features and enables you to relax, admire your handiwork, entertain, snooze needs to last. However comfortable and attractive it is if it starts to crack, warp or sag after a few years you will rightly be disappointed. From time to time we are asked about repairs to garden seats which have teak seat and back slats on a cast iron or steel frame or legs. It is not the slats we are asked for but the metal parts!
7. Timber selection. Three factors contribute to longevity and this is one. All trees (and the teak is no exception) have branches which create knots in the timber as well as natural cracks and other imperfections. If these pass the selection process and go into the furniture problems will soon appear as age and climate begin to affect it.
8. Kiln drying. This is the second factor. Trees have been drawing water up from the soil to their leaves all their lives so the trunks are full of water. A newly sawn teak log may have a moisture content of 45% and may lie in a log yard in deep pools of water for months before it goes to the sawmill. After sawing into lumber it must be dried. Natural air drying, or seasoning is often the method used and this improves the quality of the wood before machining into dimensioned components. But kiln drying is the best and surest. This achieves a much lower moisture content than air drying and is measured by probes placed in test pieces in the kiln. It is therefore a sure result and gives the teak the greatest stability.
9. Build quality. The third factor. A bicycle, a house, a chair can be made of the finest materials, but if not made properly, with the correct dimensions in components so that they all match up perfectly and the correct methods of joining components so they can withstand the stresses they will experience they cannot be expected to last long. Deficiencies start to show and, in due course, lead to something going wrong. So what does good build quality entail in garden furniture? There are three key elements.
10. Proper joinery. This is the most crucial element. It means using mortice and tenon joints which, if machined to the correct tolerances and secured with dowels of the same wood produce a very strong, durable joint which needs no glue to add strength. Some wooden garden benches can be seen with screw heads on the ends of the seatbacks revealing that screws have been used to secure the seatback in position without a mortice and tenon joint, as well as to hold the seat together generally at other points. These metal parts create high stress points which in due course lead to cracking of the wood or the screw and failure of the joint.

Proper joinery also means that all parts and components must fit together closely; gaps, poor alignment, packing or filler should not be present in garden furniture which has been correctly machined to the appropriate tolerances.

11. The best fittings and fastenings. The second element. Many models of garden furniture have adjustable backrests, fold up and have moving parts. These create the need for metal fittings, hinges, swivel points and so on. Brass is usually used for the exposed ends of these fastenings for its looks and corrosion resistance. But in some weight bearing points (e.g. where the seats of folding chairs are attached to the back legs) brass is not strong enough. In these positions the ideal metal is stainless steel.

12. Timber section. Third. How thick are the legs? More important, how thick are the seat slats which are going to take the weight of people of all sizes who sit on them. How thick and solid are all the parts of the furniture (commensurate with not looking so bulky as to appear overpowering)? Some wooden garden furniture is lightweight and therefore looks rather flimsy. It is much cheaper to make with thinner sections of timber, but it looks less imposing and may not stand the rigours of the British climate and years of wear and tear.

13. Species of wood. If you are considering wood there are many species used for outdoor leisure furniture. Ask any joiner and they will say that teak (*tectona grandis*) is the best of all by a large margin. The amazing durability of teak is exemplified by a ship carrying teak which was sunk by a mine off Ireland in World War I. After 75 years at the bottom of the sea the teak logs were salvaged from it in 1989. They were found to be in perfect condition with the original saw and tool marks still visible. Any wooden garden furniture which is advertised as “hardwood” or “tropical hardwood” will never be of teak. If it is teak the advertiser will always state this as it is such a key point. There is, of course, a great deal of tropical hardwood furniture on the market, much of it originating from rainforests in places such as Cambodia where there is little or no control to prevent deforestation. Iroko (*chlorophora excelsa*) is a very durable hardwood from West Africa. It is not harvested sustainably, nor is it quite as durable as teak. This brings us to the next point.

14. Sustainability. Only on the Indonesian island of Java is good teak grown sustainably in significant quantities. When Indonesia was the Dutch East Indies the far sighted Dutch colonists established vast teak plantations. There is no teak in the rainforests of Indonesia as it is not an indigenous species, but the long history of teak use in harsh conditions such as ships led the Dutch to realise that in the good soil of Java it could become a highly valuable cash crop. After independence in 1945 the government nationalised the teak plantations. A government department (Perum Perhutani) still controls them. They limit the annual cut and replant every year. Seedlings and saplings can be seen in areas all over the teak ‘forest districts’ as they are called.

15. FSC certification. In response to environmental concerns some of the different commercially used woods from all over the world are increasingly being certified by inspecting organisations such as Smartwood for the Forest Stewardship Council. Some teak from Java was certified as FSC*. Currently, because it is such an immensely valuable cash crop and in spite of Perum Perhutani having its own security force in the teak plantations some is traded illegally. While this does not affect its sustainability it does affect the FSC’s strict criteria for traceability from tree to finished product, so certification is currently suspended. Work is being done to re-establish teak certification in Java. The Tropical Forest Trust (TFT) is a

membership based, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to enabling wood buyers and suppliers ensure that their products originate from well managed forests which are progressing towards FSC certification, with their raw material being auditably traceable from tree to finished product.*

16. Your choice of garden furniture supplier. It is of comfort to anyone buying expensive furniture for the garden that your supplier is of good repute. Garden centres and department stores usually fulfil this requirement. Companies that sell direct can offer significant cost savings because they avoid at least one additional link in the supply chain where a profit margin has to be added to the price. Reputable direct sales companies can also offer reassuring factors for customers, including the following.

17. Advertising. Is the company you are considering purchasing from a regular advertiser (during the season) in nationwide, quality magazines? Is it constantly offering “sale” prices in order to promote quick sales (which means that all its prices are “sale” prices with the quality implications that such cut prices reveal)?

18. Badging or labelling. Much garden furniture can be found without any label on it giving the name of the supplier. A reputable supplier should be sufficiently proud of his products to be prepared to put his name on them. No badge or label on your furniture also makes it difficult to refer to the supplier if there is any advice required or problem to resolve.

19. Length of time in business. Most suppliers of good quality products have a track record and a reputation built up over a number of years’ activity in their sector. They have also gained considerable experience during that time. In today’s internet world and with manufacturers and traders in developing countries bombarding people with e-mail product offers it is so easy to import a container load of goods that many new names are constantly appearing (and disappearing) in the market place.

20. Customer service and product support. Will you be given a care guideline with your furniture? If some assembly is required when you receive it (for example because it would be too vulnerable to damage if it was delivered by a carrier fully built) will the assembly instructions be easy to follow (not a poor English translation with obscure diagrams)? Will it actually be easy to assemble? Who in the large department store will be able to talk to you to solve a small difficulty? If you are not satisfied with your purchase how easy is it to return it? How soon must you return it? Who will pay the return carriage? What will the supplier offer in response - money back, replacement, substitution with a similar item, a credit note? A company that has confidence in its products can be expected to give a guarantee. This may vary in length and clearly a long guarantee period shows more confidence in their products on the part of the supplier.

Walkham Teak[®] Ltd hopes that this report has been interesting and helpful. If you would like any more background or detail on any of the above points do, please feel free to telephone Walkham on the Freephone number in the footnote and ask for David Wright. You will not be subjected to a sales pitch for Walkham products!

*Walkham Teak[®] Ltd holds FSC chain of custody number SA-COC-1654D valid until 31 October 2011.

Walkham Teak[®] Ltd is a member of the Tropical Forest Trust.