

# Street Cred

Taylor's latest environmentalist strategy involves the use of a new wood, Urban Ash. How will it stack up against the established timber elite?

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Words David Mead Photography Neil Godwin









## TAYLOR BUILDER'S EDITION 324CE £3,239

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### What You Need To Know

#### 1 What's 'Urban Ash' all about, then?

Also known as 'Shamel ash' or 'evergreen ash', the trees are found in cities across Southern California, providing shade, windbreaks, wildlife habitats and so on. After 70 years or so they reach the end of their cycle and need to be removed. Taylor's master designer Andy Powers experimented with various urban species and found that Shamel ash, "in almost every physical way I can measure it, is reminiscent of really good Honduran mahogany".

#### 2 That's a big claim...

And it wasn't made lightly. There are many species that have reached the end of their lives as part of the "green infrastructure" of California's cities, and Andy Powers was invited to test a few. After several prototypes, he settled on Urban Ash to lead the charge of Taylor's latest initiative.

#### 3 So, this is just a part of what Taylor is doing for the environment?

Yes. You might have heard of Taylor's Ebony Project that dates back to 2011 when the company became co-owner of a sawmill in Cameroon to ensure the wood's sustainability. Taylor has initiated a replanting programme to guarantee the least possible impact on resources. The Urban Ash programme is another step in the company's drive to go green.

One of the greatest obstacles a guitar company – or individual luthier, for that matter – has to face is to convince the eyes, ears, hearts and minds of its customer base that a new and ecologically sound wood the company is beginning to use is a good idea. After all, steel-string acoustic manufacture has been convincing us for generations that the tried-and-true timbers such as spruce, rosewood and mahogany are the tonal royal family and prospective usurpers are often treated with either complete disdain or a polite, "I'd rather not, thanks."

Traditional acoustic guitar woods have been in use for approximately 100 years, since Martin began its pioneering work with steel-strung instruments during the early part of the 20th century. The 'good vibrations' of spruce, rosewood and mahogany can be heard ringing out for as long as music has been recorded – and some of us look back with a glowing nostalgia at the works of Joni Mitchell, Crosby, Stills & Nash and their contemporaries whose timeless music was almost exclusively underpinned by Martin D-28s.



The fretboard is made using West African ebony





The 324ce's back and sides welcome in a new recruit to the timber brigade, but its top is the more familiar mahogany

But times have changed. We've never been more acutely aware of dwindling resources where wood is concerned, and the recent Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (aka CITES) mandate on rosewoods served as a much-needed wake-up call for the industry. Lesson learned.

Since then, we've seen companies across the globe begin to experiment with less threatened and more sustainable woods, gradually easing into our consciousness the message that the good times are far from over, as long as we're sensible, but, more importantly, that there is another way of doing things.

Bob Taylor has taken the message to heart and his company is one that is leading the field in finding an ecologically sound way forward for guitar making. Taylor's Ebony Project has been in place for nearly a decade, ensuring a properly managed resource for a timber that features on just about every acoustic it turns out. Now, the company has turned its attention to another supply that was under its nose all along – urban timber, from trees that form the green canopy in Taylor's hometown of El Cajon and beyond. Teaming up with the West Coast Arborists, the question was when trees they were seeing every day on their way to the factory reached the end of

## THE RIVALS

The biggest rival here is Martin, and its Modern Deluxe OM-28 comes in at just over £3,661, but we've seen them street at £3,166, too. Also, the Martin Standard D-18 is a whole lotta guitar for £2,375, and well worth investigating. At this price, you're also nosing into the bespoke market with a Fylde Oberon (£3,500) or Orsino (£2,500). Alister Atkin's 000 models are priced around £2,399. If off-the-peg is your thing, then Yamaha's LS56 ARE II and LJ56 ARE II both come in at £3,495.





1. Our review model is fitted with a set of Elixir Phosphor Bronze light gauge strings

2. The Urban Ash's grain pattern is just visible through the 324ce's Tobacco Burst finish

There are 173 million trees in California's urban canopy, so why not do a few experiments?

their lives and had to be replaced owing to damage, weather or disease, where did they end up? And if the answer was either landfill or firewood, why not give them a second life as part of an instrument? After all, there are an estimated 173 million trees in California's urban canopy, so why not do a few experiments?

Enter Taylor's chief designer Andy Powers, who did just that, selecting a few examples of urban timber that looked most likely to fit the purpose and making guitars out of them. Urban Ash, Taylor's trademarked name for Shamel or evergreen ash, proved not only to be a contender but Andy noted that its qualities as a guitar-making wood were similar to Honduran mahogany. The first model Urban Ash has been used in is the very one we have before us today, the 324ce Builder's Edition. So let's take a look... and, more importantly, a listen.

## Feel & Sounds

You're probably as eager as we were to see what Urban Ash actually looks like. To be honest, it's very difficult to give an accurate report as the Tobacco finish Taylor has used on the body and neck is very nearly opaque. Held under strong sunlight, some evidence of a grain pattern becomes apparent, but it's tricky to build an overall picture. From what we can see, however, there are a few characteristics that you might find on an ash Stratocaster – it's not a photofit, but it's certainly reminiscent. There appears to be quite an attractive cross-patterning, too, like you sometimes get with spruce tops – that offset vertical figuring that contrasts the horizontal grain structure. There might even be a hint of mahogany about its looks, too.

The mahogany top is more visible under the finish and everything there looks in good shape, the simple Italian acrylic rosette breaking the top's otherwise





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austere appearance. There's an armrest atop the guitar's lower bout, mirrored by the bevelled cutaway diagonally opposite. There's no binding to the rim of the body, Taylor electing to offer a chamfered edge as an alternative, a simple ivoroid purfling providing the body's only other decoration.

Under the hood we find Taylor's trailblazing V bracing pattern, which the company is rolling out across its range and so it's no surprise to find it here, too. It may be that our ears – and that of many acoustic guitar players – still haven't fully assimilated the sound this bracing pattern has to offer, with X bracing still *de rigueur* for many manufacturers.

The 324ce's plain good looks extend to the instrument's mahogany neck, too, with the scarf joint below the headstock proving, once again, to be invisible under the finish. Gotoh's 510 tuners provide some contrast, with a fine antique gold finish offering a



A beveled armrest on the lower bout assures player comfort



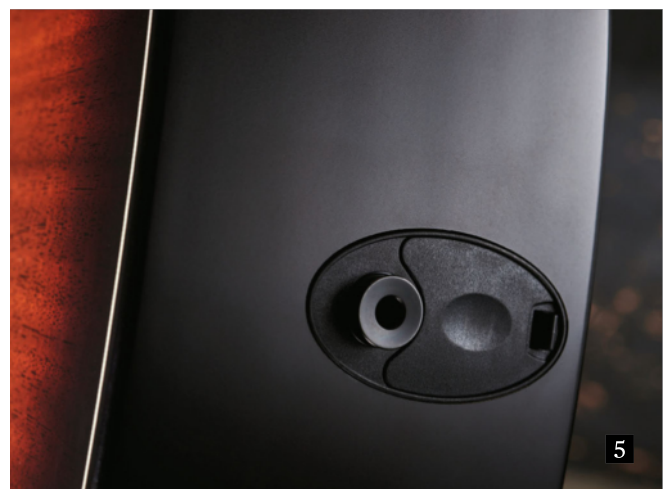


**3.** Live performance is ably handled by Taylor's Expression System 2 pickup and preamp

**4.** A set of Gotoh 510 Antique Gold tuners adds a touch of class to the guitar's headstock

**5.** The preamp's battery compartment is hidden away underneath the jack socket/endpin

**6.** The 324ce's voice is sweet and well balanced without any unnecessary mush in the midrange



This is a very well-behaved guitar. Nothing is out of place, no nasty sonic surprises...

little bit of regal bling at this point. Even the finely cut nut is made from black Tusq (an easy identifier of a model with the V-class bracing), in keeping with the 324ce's understated looks, and blends well with the ebony fingerboard and subtle acrylic faux pearl inlays.

In all probability, Taylor's message here is that the guitar's looks are not its most outstanding feature in this particular case. It knows how to build a guitar and everything here from a construction point of view is well up to scratch, even if some of it is buried beneath the finish. But perhaps this was never meant to be a feast for the eyes. The proof of this particular pudding is all about how it sounds and if the eyes aren't distracted by boisterous décor we stand a better chance of auditioning the new wood with pure objectivity.

The carve of the neck is what Taylor refers to as 'Standard' in its spec, with a 381mm (15-inch) radius to the fretboard

and a generous 44.5mm (1.75-inch) nut width. As with every Taylor acoustic we've played, the neck is a comfortable fit in the hand, the frets are seated, finished and trimmed perfectly, so that the playing experience is a breeze for the left hand.

So, what *does* it sound like? First impressions are very good. Note separation is excellent and free from any unnecessary 'mush' and even the midrange hump that you sometimes find on acoustics around the F/F# trouble spot area on the D string (roughly 175 to 185Hz) is noticeable by its absence. The bass isn't dreadnought fierce, even with the sixth string drop-tuned to D, but in very good balance with the somewhat demure trebles.

Tonally speaking, this is a very well-behaved guitar. Nothing is out of place, no nasty sonic surprises and our first few chords are clear and clean with a generous amount of sustain completing the picture. Does it sound like top-notch mahogany





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is present as part of the sound picture? It definitely has a few of the qualities of mahogany and we don't know exactly what the V bracing is bringing to the sound party, either. But whatever it is, we like what we're hearing.

The 324ce is equipped with Taylor's Expression System 2 and, plugged into our AER Compact 60, it proves its worth with little or no colouration to the purity of the guitar's acoustic sound. In fact, we were able to leave the EQ on the guitar's preamp absolutely flat and still had a sound that we wouldn't mind gigging one bit.

### Verdict

Adding all factors into the mix – that is, the sustainable nature of Urban Ash and the fact it would have ended up as firewood or in a landfill site had it not been repurposed as a guitar wood – we'd say it's another success for Taylor and the design sensibilities of Andy Powers.

It's a superbly made instrument with a voice that's simply enchanting, both acoustically and through an amp. It could work quite ably in the hands of a singer-songwriter and even hold its head up high in the instrumental field, too.

It's fairly pricey at north of three grand and might be out of the question for the casual strummer, while others may think an untried wood is taking too much of a risk considering the investment that's necessary here. But the more versatile a guitar is, the wider its appeal to the marketplace as a whole and we think that the 324ce Builder's Edition ticks a great many boxes. And, as a potential all-rounder, will still expect it to enchant both the hands and ears – and hearts – of a great many players. 

Turn to our Blueprint feature on p110 to read more about Taylor's journey with this sustainable new guitar-making wood



### TAYLOR BUILDER'S EDITION 324CE

**PRICE:** £3,239 (inc case)

**ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** 14-fret Grand Auditorium electro cutaway

**TOP:** Mahogany

**BACK/SIDES:** Urban Ash

**MAX RIM DEPTH:** 117.4mm

**MAX BODY WIDTH:** 406.4mm

**NECK:** Mahogany

**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5")

**TUNERS:** Gotoh 510 Antique Gold

**NUT/WIDTH:** Black Tusq /44.8mm

**FINGERBOARD:** West African Ebony, Italian acrylic compass inlays

**FRETS:** 20, medium

**BRIDGE/SPACING:** West African Ebony w/ compensated Micarta saddle/56mm

**ELECTRICS:** Taylor Expression System 2 w/ volume, bass and treble controls

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 2.1/4.62

**OPTIONS:** None

**RANGE OPTIONS:** The Taylor Builder's Edition instruments range from the 324ce reviewed here through to the 517 (£2,999) and 517e (£3,179), the 652ce (£4,319) and extends to the 912ce (£6,479)

**LEFT-HANDERS:** No

**FINISH:** Tobacco Kona Burst Silent Satin

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**PROS** A well-built, tonally satisfying instrument with its environmental credentials well in place

**CONS** No left-handers and the shock of the new might put some players off