

Ash Dieback

Anyone who values trees will be aware of ash dieback, but our experience of talking to visitors on nature reserves leads us to believe that many people are still unaware of just how pervasive the disease is.

Starting with the facts, the disease is caused by a fungus which has made its way from Asia (where its own species of ash trees are mainly resistant) all the way to the UK, where the trees are mainly not resistant to it. The air-borne spread to the UK from Europe was inevitable, but not helped by The Woodland Trust which for several years sold/provided 'English ash saplings' to eager planters, but failed to say that, although the seeds were from UK trees, the plants had been grown on the continent and then brought back to the UK - along with the fungus which was already well established there.

Ash dieback has now spread quickly throughout the whole of the UK. Just to give an idea of the speed of the spread, in the Summer of 2018 we noticed one dodgy-looking tree at Smardale National Nature Reserve. By the Summer of 2020, we struggled to find a small tree which hadn't succumbed to some degree, and there are a lot of ash trees at Smardale. We haven't looked recently, but saw clear signs of the disease on some of the ash trees in Common Wood in 2019.



Ash canker

The signs of a diseased tree are visible all year round. In Spring/Summer, a worrying sign is clumps of curled and brown leaves on an otherwise fit-looking tree. Closer inspection might well show elongated diamond-shaped lesions on trunks. In Autumn/Winter, look for unhealthy-looking tips of

branches - if some look brown or a dull purple, all you need to do is the snap test. Just see if you can snap off a bit of the twig, and you can be assured the tree has ash dieback if you

Splendid as they can be, ash trees do tend to be prone to diseases. Ash canker often produces worrying-looking lumps on trunks (left), and it is not uncommon to find an ominous dark patch in the middle of cut trunks/branches suggesting all is not well (*below*), but affected trees often seem to cope with such 'traditional' ailments, in ways which they can't when attacked by the new phenomenon of ash dieback.



Diseased Ash

can. All three symptoms are evident in this picture (*Ash (ii) below*). (Just in case you are not sure what ash trees look like in Winter, they are the ones with black, tulip-like buds, visible in the last picture.)



Ash dieback (left) is most obvious in young trees, partly because it is easy to access them, but also because it often has a significant impact on most of the tree. Its impact on mature trees is not always as easy to see, but, if you look carefully upwards, you will sometimes see areas within the canopy where all does not look well. You might also find fallen branches below what might look like a fit tree. Ashes are well known for dropping branches when feeling under threat from drought or disease. Mature trees may seem to be coping with ash dieback, but its presence renders them more likely to develop other unpleasant ailments.

Ash dieback

So, what is to be done about a disease which will have a huge impact on the environment, and an equally huge impact on the purse as potentially dangerous trees have to be felled? Sadly, the answer seems to be that there is little or nothing to be done. The fungus thrives in leaf mould, so you could collect dropped leaves in Autumn, but doing this would have no effect on the spores happily blowing in the wind, and coming soon to the tree you want to protect. Just to cheer you up further, tree surgeons are increasingly reluctant to scale diseased trees given the uncertainty of what might happen when they start work, so we might just have to wait until diseased trees simply fall onto us!

The only positive news is that it is known that a small percentage of trees do have inbuilt resistance to the disease - the figures seem to vary from 20% to 2% - so there is the possibility of collecting and then cultivating seeds from resistant trees, but, even if this is successful, the landscape in some parts of the country - and the county - will look very different for decades/centuries. If you happen to have ash trees in your garden/woodland, don't rush to fell them (unless you think they pose a real threat to life and/or property), as the odd one might just prove to be immune.

You may be old enough to remember the impact Dutch elm disease had on trees and the landscape, but ash dieback looks set to be even more disastrous. Next time you hear a politician sounding off about the benefits of globalisation, feel free to mention ash dieback. The natural world moves rather more slowly than the world of mankind, and there are good reasons for this.

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