



Don't trash your ash!



Managing ash dieback in your parish or town

A report from Dr Tean Mitchell of Green Planet Media working with Queen Thorne Nature Watch Group

GREAT NEWS : Dieback is not a death sentence for our native ash after all. According to the latest advice from Forest Research, the government's woodland research body, felling infected trees should only be done where there is danger to people or property. It appears that far fewer trees die than previously predicted and even infected trees can recover to full health*.

So, before you decide to fell any of your local ash, (at vast expense) consider whether the level of infection warrants such action, or whether there is risk to life or property. Consider pollarding or partial felling instead. There is concern that over-enthusiastic felling will lead to the loss of this important native tree from our woodlands, countryside, streets and gardens. We will do untold damage to unique ecosystems with unknown ecological impacts and knock on effects for people, wildlife and landscapes. If we are to develop a resistant population of ash, we must save as many trees as possible.

There is also growing evidence that mature ash can survive the disease*. At a recent woodland seminar (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0-WxVi_fZI) Vikki Bengtsson, a researcher and recently-appointed chair of the Ancient Tree Forum, found that very few mature trees actually died from the disease. Her research suggests that avoidance of tree surgery on older trees and maybe pollarding in younger trees gives them a chance to recover and grow.

Earlier predictions of losing all our ash have been revised many times with advisory bodies now noting survival rates of up to 30% (Forestry Commission, Forest Research, Tree Council, Woodland Trust, Association of Public Service Excellence to name just a few). This may not sound much but that number is growing each year. The government's own research body - Forest Research - makes the case and advises:

- With the exceptions of felling for public safety or timber production, **we advise a general presumption against felling living ash trees, whether infected or not.**
- There is **good evidence that a proportion will tolerate infection.** And that proportion is growing!
- A proportion of trees become diseased, but then recover to good health.

Even the Forestry Commission's latest advice is to **only cut trees down where safety is a serious consideration. Pollarding or crown reduction is a much better option** than the wholesale destruction of this important native tree which has helped shape our landscape for millennia.

All around the British countryside there are unaffected trees which may provide the crucial resistant gene-pool for the future. Apart from the academic data*, we have lots of anecdotal feedback from woodland owners throughout the UK (via social media pages) that they are seeing recovery in previously infected trees. Just down the road from me a tree surgeon has reported that previously infected trees, partially felled two years ago, now seem returned to full health.

Parish and Town Councils are particularly well-placed to help find resistant individuals. Councillors, residents and Tree Wardens can all help record and monitor ash trees in their area, and send reports in to The Living Ash Project which is collating data from around the country to identify healthy trees and protect those which might lead to the discovery of a resistant strain. <https://livingashproject.org.uk/reportatree/>

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* References appended

Green Planet Media, Cobden, Chalk Lane, Hindon, Wiltshire SP3 6EG
Tel: 01747 820718. Mob: 07970 116 525 tean@greenplanetmedia.com