

Ash dieback Q&A – 03.02.20

What is ash dieback disease?

First confirmed in the UK in 2012, ash dieback, also known as 'Chalara' or 'Chalara ash dieback', is a disease of ash trees caused by a fungus called *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*. The disease is now present in all counties of England. Experience in Europe suggests that the majority of ash trees in woodlands infected with the disease will decline and die.

What are the symptoms of Ash Die Back?

The main symptoms of ash dieback are:

- Blackening of leaves which often hang on the tree
- Discoloured stems, often with a diamond-shape lesion
- Black and shrivelled shoots
- The death of twigs and branches in the crown of mature trees
- Small white fruiting fungal bodies on blackened stalks in early autumn

What happens to the affected tree?

The disease causes ash trees to die. Young ash trees die quickly, whilst mature trees can be killed by a yearly cycle of repeated infection. Ash dieback renders trees more vulnerable to other fungal pathogens such as honey fungus, which rapidly compromises the integrity of the timber and root system of the tree causing branches or whole trees to become dangerously unstable or collapse completely, and without warning.

When infected, the tree tries to compensate for the death of the shoots at the end of the branches at the crown of the tree by growing shoots out of the main stem of tree which leads to a characteristic bushy "fox-tail" appearance of leaves near the stem when the tree is in leaf.

How widespread is ash dieback on Somerset Wildlife Trust's reserves?

Somerset Wildlife Trust manages 1,700 hectares of land in Somerset. Assessment of affected woodlands have started to show extensive areas of ash trees across the county are infected by the disease. The most affected area is Mendip, where the woodlands have a very high proportion of ash, up to 90% in some woods.

What are you doing?

Our reserves are very popular with local people and receive many visitors per year so public safety is of paramount importance.

The Trust has carried out an assessment of the affected woodlands in line with ash dieback guidance from the Forestry Commission. The Trust has also considered the National Tree Safety Group's ash dieback guidance. Because we felt that regular annual tree safety inspection regime did not take full account of the risks posed to the public by the emerging threat of ash dieback, we engaged the services of a specialist arboricultural consultant to help us assess the risks across our reserves. Using established Quantitative Tree Risk Assessment methods, they assessed the statistical level of risk associated with the ash trees suffering from ash dieback present, with a focus on the badly affected Mendip reserves.

This process highlighted several areas where the level of risk posed to the public is outside of acceptable levels, requiring action to be taken to reduce these risks.

As such the Trust has determined that the selective felling of affected ash trees which stand beside public footpaths, bridleways, roads and other high risk features is the most appropriate course of action. Ash trees in the middle of woodland will be left for nature to take its course. The Trust has already removed some dangerous or fallen ash trees from areas including footpaths and roads and will continue to do so.

How will the change in the woodland and the work you are doing affect the wildlife?

While removal of these trees is necessary for safety reasons, we will be taking all possible measures to minimise the impact of their removal on the wildlife and biodiversity of the reserves. Firstly, the timing of the works means they will take place outside of the breeding bird season where possible (although identification of a very dangerous tree outside of these restrictions would necessitate immediate action). We will also have an ecologist on hand to identify potential bat roosts, and to identify working methods to minimise the impact on bats and other protected species. Specialist contractor equipment will use "soft felling" techniques, which will also minimise the impact of the works for example on any dormice that may be present. Any new regrowth that occurs after the tree safety works have been completed is likely to be beneficial for these dormice, acting as a corridor of foraging habitat as it scrubs up with young tree and bramble regrowth. Opening rides and glades will bring more light to the forest floor, so we may see more butterflies, orchids and other species benefitting longer term.

Which reserves will be affected?

All Somerset Wildlife Trust sites with ash trees are likely to be affected by the disease to some extent. We are taking a phased approach to dealing with the problem, with the following sites being badly affected and therefore areas for priority work in 2019/2020:

Harridge Wood and Edford Wood

Both of these woodlands are very badly affected by ash dieback in quite advanced stages. Therefore, urgent tree works are being undertaken in 2020 to make roads and footpaths safe where it is possible for us to do so. Temporary road and footpath closures will be needed while these works take place.

In addition, some footpaths, where the risk from failing trees is judged to be high, will be closed until further notice. Signage will be erected to indicate the closures and further information provided on site signage and on our website.

Due to the high proportion of ash trees in Harridge and Edford woods we strongly suggest that members of the public do not visit these reserves at this time. We are sorry if this causes any inconvenience, however public safety is paramount.

Rose Wood

This woodland has trees affected by ash dieback and work has been underway in January 2020 to fell some affected trees. There are also some badly affected ash beside the road (70 metre stretch of A371) which we are planning to remove using contractors. This will involve a temporary road closure for the duration of the work. Trees on this reserve will be reassessed in summer 2020 when they should be in full leaf and the effects of ash dieback are easier to assess, and further decisions will then be made about any further works or footpath closures that may become necessary. We suggest that members of the public do not visit the reserve at this time.

Cheddar Wood

Cheddar Wood is a permit only reserve. We have identified the need to remove several ash trees along the roadside boundary of Cheddar Wood, but the majority of ash trees in the wood are not accessible to the public. At this reserve our focus will be on securing the ongoing biodiversity of the woodland as far as possible. We will be carrying out general thinning of trees within the wood, focussing on weak and diseased ash trees. Felling weaker trees surrounding a healthier ash tree reduces the competition and stress experienced by the healthy tree, reduces the density of fungal spores and gives it space to spread its canopy and grow, all increasing its chances of surviving. Selective thinning also opens up the canopy, reducing the humidity that the spores like, allows light to hit the forest floor which encourages wildflowers and other ground flora and invertebrates and allows remaining oak, small leaved lime and other tree species to thrive.

Who is doing the work?

Somerset Wildlife Trust will be instructing specialist contractors to carry out the work, who are experienced at working on sensitive sites. The work will be carried out using machinery which fells the tree and takes the branches off mechanically. Due to the extent of the disease it is too dangerous to use chainsaw operators for a lot of this work.

How will we replace the trees?

The woodlands will be left to regenerate naturally where ever possible with a range of tree species including, hopefully, some disease tolerant ash trees. Those ash saplings that are not resistant to the disease will die within a few years and will not pose a safety risk due to their limited size. If this does not happen, the area will be considered for restocking with an alternative native species. Progress will be reviewed on an ongoing basis.

What about the long term future of Somerset's woodland?

Like Dutch Elm Disease in the 1970s, which killed millions of elms, ash dieback will leave our landscape profoundly altered. We're devastated by the rapid onset of the disease. It has spread faster and further than anyone predicted with Mendips woodlands the most severely affected.

Ash is genetically diverse, so there is the possibility of resistance building up in the ash population. However, it could be that over 95% of our ash trees will be affected - there is a genuine concern that we may be seeing the end of ash as a common tree in the UK.

Our long-term strategy in Somerset is to ensure we have connected landscapes containing rich and diverse woods, with a range of species. And to ensure, as far as we can, we secure woodland ecosystems that are resilient to disease in general.

The question of whether we should we attempt to regenerate ash, allow natural species change (probably to sycamore), plant new species (native or non-native), or (in recent ash woods rather than ancient woods) use the change to create rich grassland and scrub habitat is one currently under discussion.

As a member of the public should I avoid affected reserves completely?

We always encourage visitors to stick to public footpaths and waymarked trails only when visiting our reserves and are very clear to explain that on any and all site instructions must be followed. With the onset of ash dieback this absolutely remains the case. Our priority is to ensure the safety of those paths in the affected reserves and fell trees that might compromise the safety of those paths and present a risk to the public. To remove the risk and to carry out the tree works we will need to close footpaths entirely. Signage will be clearly displayed where this is the case and it is vital that visitors abide by these notices. We will also ensure that up to date information is provided on our website and on our social media channels and would encourage all visitors to check these before the set off for their visit.

Find out more about ash dieback

Find out more about ash dieback on the Forestry Commission website below.

[Learn more](#)