

## THE SPECIAL CASE FOR THE YEW TREE

***'Yews of great age are rare outside of churchyards, and no other type of ancient trees occurs frequently inside church grounds'.***

FLORA BRITANNICA

There will always be speculation about yews and just why so many are found in churchyards. Poisonous to livestock? Welcome decoration for the midwinter and Palm Sunday? To purify ground that contains the dead? Their spiritual significance is not confined to Christians, but for Druids and Celtic people too they are symbolic of everlasting life, or resurrection. There are thought to be many sites where the yew tree predates the Christian church.

The Common Yew (*Taxus baccata*) is the most widely planted, but the Irish, or Upright Yew (*Taxus baccata 'fastigiata'*) is also frequently found.

Understanding how they grow and survive is the key to good management – and respect.

- All parts of the tree are poisonous apart from the bright red aril, the fleshy casing on the seed. While this means that fewer things will attack it or live on it, many birds, especially starling, thrush and blackbird, which distribute its seeds, love the aril.
- Competition for space is diminished if a yew tree has heavy evergreen shade, especially if the lower boughs are left on the tree. However, shade tolerant plants such as hazel, holly and elder can do very well.
- It has several growing tactics to aid its longevity: it can produce new shoots anywhere, the top boughs can send down aerial roots which may fuse with the main trunk or remain as a separate tree growing through the original. Boughs that rest on the ground can take root.
- Becoming hollow is of no consequence to a yew tree; a cylinder is an extremely stable structure.
- Yew trees can split and become more than one tree.
- Male and female flowers are found on separate plants (dioecious) so they maximise fertilisation

opportunities by cross pollinating with other yew trees and increase genetic variation.

- They take ages to decay, which means that dead wood can act as scaffolding for new wood to grow over.
- New roots can resurface and form another tree.

**Never assume a yew tree is dead, despite its appearance; many ancient trees carry a quantity of deadwood, their growth rate can be erratic; and for periods of their long lives look untidy, or even dead. Their ability to regenerate is astounding, but this should never be seen as an excuse to pollard an old tree.**

### Good management

- Non-intervention is good management. Don't be tempted to do some tidying of deadwood, wayward limbs, and large tree roots. 'Tidiness is the death of conservation' says Oliver Rackham and that should be a yew tree's maxim.
- Pruning can be done in a formative sense to young trees, but leave dead wood (with its own ecosystem), and certainly avoid taking off large limbs that would leave large wounds on mature trees. Don't impose pollarding (taking large limbs off) on a very old tree. You are reducing its vigour by reducing the leaf area.
- If it is essential, stage pruning over several years, and never exceed removal of 30% of the crown.



- It would be better to prop up old limbs or let them rest on the ground rather than cut them off. Refer to [www.ancient-yew.org](http://www.ancient-yew.org) for some imaginative examples.
- Seek the advice of an arborist if you really have to do some remedial work. Look at the

contact list at the end of section 11 for organisations.

- Remove ivy as it can smother the crown, adding weight and cutting out the light. Though not a parasite it will constrict the tree's growth. Do a bat survey first if there is a chance they might be roosting in thick ivy on trunks. Try not to let ivy take a hold in the first place on veteran trees.
- Remove if possible all those extra things that people put in and around yew trees – railings, stones, bottles, and masonry.
- Remove shade tolerant shrubs underneath, hazels, holly saplings and elder are the main culprits. They will compete for water and nutrients.
- Avoid using a veteran tree as a focus for either dumping churchyard waste – grass clippings and grave diggings or for putting the shed, building materials and broken gravestones. Trees will suffer under compaction of the soil. Also avoid stacking up vegetation as this can create a fire hazard.
- Check to see if the tree has a Tree Preservation Order (TPO) as you will need permission from the planning authority to do any remedial work, and certainly a TPO should prevent its removal.

Ancient yew trees should be revered. Showing them off, and informing visitors to the churchyard how you are managing them are a good opportunity to ensure their longevity and celebrate their unique place in our churchyards.

Seek further information about these unique trees from the Ancient Yew Group [www.ancient-yew.org](http://www.ancient-yew.org)

