Ash tree dieback

Almost certainly you will have heard about a fungal disease affecting ash trees in this country causing a condition called ash dieback.

The ash is an important and conspicuous member of our tree flora. It grows to a height of 40m and has a domed canopy composed of compound leaves each with nine leaflets. The airy canopy allows sunlight to reach the woodland floor allowing a rich and varied ground flora to grow beneath the tree, providing abundant food for a wide variety of insects and birds. But its continued existence is under threat.

Ash dieback is of particular concern as there are enormous numbers of ash trees in Britain, occupying around 10% of our woodlands, with an additional 12 million or so trees outside of our woods and forests. In infected trees the leaves wilt and develop brown or black patches, and lesions appear on the bark of the branches and trunk. These enlarge and extend from the initially infected area, killing the bark as they spread. A combination of leaf loss and crown dieback eventually results in the death of the tree.

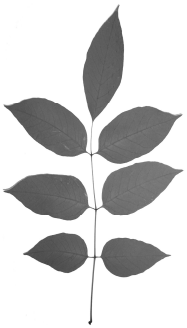
The fungus is specific to ash and was first reported in Poland in 1992, and since then infected trees have been found widely across Europe. These include trees in forests, urban areas such as parks and gardens, and young trees in nurseries. In February 2012 the fungus made its appearance in this country, discovered in a shipment of trees sent to a nursery in Buckinghamshire from a tree grower in the Netherlands.

Soon, it was found in other sites in Britain, all of which had been planted with young ash trees from nurseries. However in October 2012, a number of cases were discovered in East Anglia in established woodland, which were not associated with recently supplied nursery stock. In the following months further finds were confirmed in other counties including Kent and Essex. This showed that the fungus was thriving in this country and passing from one tree to another. The microscopic fungal spores were being spread by wind and rain, and possibly by animals and people.

The fungus is now being treated as a quarantine pest under national emergency measures, and it is important that suspected cases of the disease are reported to either the Environment Agency or a local Environmental Health department. This has led to a ban on the import of ash trees but this will only stop more infected trees from being introduced and may have little impact on the progress of the disease in this country.

It is feared that the disease will not be controlled as there is no way of stopping its spread. It is not feasible to spray or inject every ash tree in the country even if a suitable fungicide was available. Eventually, and this may not be very far in the future, the disease will cause the destruction of virtually all of our ash trees. The hope is that some trees will be resistant and will not succumb to the infection and that breeding from these survivors will, in the fullness of time, lead to the reappearance of ash trees that are not susceptible to fungal attack.

Many of us may be familiar with a similar situation that occurred in the 1970s that affected our native elm trees. This was also caused by a fungus and became known as Dutch elm disease because early research on the fungus was carried out in the Netherlands. A small number of elms were resistant to the disease and were used as breeding stock but the elm has not recovered and is a rare sight in this country. Let us hope that the ash fares better.



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