

## A walk on the wild side

Cholderton Estate

### A Tree for Every Season

The time of planting is upon us. There is a place for trees on every farm; a gap in a hedge, a corner or a focal point, where the towering beauty of an arboreal giant will become the key feature in a landscape, a century hence. Trees can be planted but also found. I frequently spy some multi headed sapling in a hedgerow, which has been repeatedly cut by the trimmer. By selecting a leading shoot, removing the side growths and offering protection with a pole; this will in a few years metamorphasize into a splendid tree due to a well established root system.

Exotic species may be much planted in garden and park, but generally these are of little benefit to indigenous wildlife.

Britain has a good range of native trees and emphasis should be given to ensure the planting of the right species in the most suitable location, allowing of soil type, depth and drainage.

Our native Oaks (pedunculate or sessile) are of incalculable value for a vast range of insects, birds and mammals, and should always be included somewhere on the better soils. Even on light land they can flourish at the base of a hill, on a clay cap or in a damp valley. With monumental potential in the distant future, this tree could become the centre of an otherwise un predictable landscape.

Black Poplar, with its warty trunk, is greatly endangered and yet beautiful with its light shimmering leaves, perfect by the river's edge.

The Alder, an unobtrusive and little appreciated tree, with convoluted bark, can be festooned with lichens and bears little cones which produce seeds much beloved by Siskins. These birds work the Alders day after day, like so many canaries with their yellow and dunn plumage and their distinctive calls as the fly up and down the stream.

Wild Pears bare great clusters of white flowers in the early summer. With deeply fissured bark, they can be spectacular in both summer and winter. A joy to discover on a Sunday ramble.

Whitebeams are members of the Sorbus family and are some of the most interesting and decorative of all our native trees. There are many species, some of which are only found in very restricted areas and can have tiny populations. 'Aria' types are characterised by roundish leaves which are silver underneath. In the spring, as the buds burst, the tree can appear to be a mass of grey silver tulips. These are small trees but can produce berries in great bunches. They are a most valuable food source for many birds including Ring Ouzles, Fieldfares and Waxwings. Other Sorbus are of the 'Acuparia' type, such as the Rowan with its leaves like an Ash tree. Again, with abundant blossom and a heavy berry crop, a most valuable tree in acidic areas.

Local species of Sorbus can be unobtainable in the trade and it is therefore to be recommended that trees are grown from seed. Gathering a few ripe berries and planting them in a compost – soil mixture over the winter, should result in a few young trees in the following year. If potted on, these can be planted out 3 or 4 years later. This is a marvellous way in which local people can help to sustain population of these sometimes extremely rare plants.

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Sweet Chestnut is another species of great value, fast growing, yet producing top quality fencing material if coppiced or delicious chestnuts for the Christmas fire. Excellent on heavy soil. As the leaves fall, the bark is revealed in vertical contours that gradually twist as they reach up the tree.

Elm trees that are resistant to Dutch Elm Disease are now available. Planting some of these up hedgerows, could help to rebuild populations of the elusive White Letter Hairstreak; a small dark butterfly with a characteristic white 'W' mark visible on its hind wing when in a resting posture. This species was decimated in the Dutch Elm epidemic, but can linger on unseen on Elm secondaries.

Field Maple is an interesting tree if allowed to grow as a standard in the hedgerow. It becomes a spectacular chrome yellow just before the leaf falls in the autumn. It does well on chalky soils and is the food plant of two particularly rare moths.

Silver Birch – the lady of the forest – always graceful and fast growing. A tree upon which many invertebrates exclusively feed and produces catkins with seed attractive to birds. A group of these will enliven any dark corner on the farm.

Currently it is inadvisable to plant Ash, one of our best timber species but now under attack from yet another introduced disease. Free trade carries a terrible price and our authorities seem unable to grasp the concept that controls are necessary to prevent the importation of these rapidly transmitted diseases from abroad. We need to learn from the Australian authorities. Sensible precautions cannot only protect the environment but also home trade and employment.

For evergreens, Holly with its wonderful glossy leaves and shining red berries in winter, is a superb plant for the hedge or field edge and host for the graceful Holly Blue Butterfly which lays its eggs in the flowers.

Junipers are a bushy conifer once abundant on the chalk downs. It has now vanished from almost all of its former range. The exclusive food plant of the Juniper Carpet Moth and a source of berries for cooking game and flavouring gin. They can grow in a thick columnar shape and with their grey blue needle leaves do well on those cold, north facing banks where little else will grow.

The Scots Pine, tall and statuesque with red flaking bark; quick growing but underplanted today. A group of these correctly situated will make a great contribution to improving the landscape value of any farm. They are valuable for Red Squirrels who enjoy their seed bearing cones as do birds like Crossbills and Goldfinches.

The Yew is one other native conifer but given its extremely poisonous foliage that is very attractive to stock, its planting needs to be restricted to areas where animals will never gain access.

Planting a tree is a statement of your belief and hope in the continuity of life and a gift for the future. It is also an act of remembrance to those millions that were felled to clear the land many centuries ago.

Henry Edmunds FRES  
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