

Position Statement

Tree Health

UK biosecurity and
plant imports

July 2017



WOODLAND
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Tree health: UK biosecurity and plant imports

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The Woodland Trust

Biosecurity and plant imports

The Trust's view

- Disease, decay and death are natural processes in woods and other treescapes. The resulting deadwood provides important ecological functions and a vital habitat for many species. However, this ecological balance has been dramatically altered by the introduction of many new pests and diseases, often through inadvertent imports on plants, soils and a range of wooden packaging material.
- The fragmented nature of UK woodland makes it vulnerable to pests and diseases; and this vulnerability is increased by a reliance on too few tree species.
- Climate change, leading to the anticipated milder climate, especially in the south of England, could allow more pests to survive in the UK. Trees and woods are also experiencing greater stresses that will increase their susceptibility to pests and diseases.
- The complex international plant trade is causing uncertainties about the origin of plants; consumers often cannot make informed decisions about their purchases.
- Surveillance is key to early detection and eradication of new threats, this is why the Trust is a major partner in the Observatree surveillance project to spot potential problems early, making eradication more feasible.

The current Government policy on UK biosecurity has not prevented the epidemics we are now experiencing. Fundamental changes are required to better protect our treed landscapes. This is particularly important in light of our exit from the EU.

The Trust will

- Use only UK sourced and grown (UKSG) trees for planting on our estate, and when working with partners and other landowners, to minimise the risk of introducing a new disease or pest.
- Promote natural regeneration of woods wherever feasible – to strengthen local adaptations and resistance to potential pests and diseases and reduce the need for planting.
- Promote our new certification and assurance scheme to allow nurseries to provide consumers with confidence that the trees they purchase are genuinely UK sourced and grown.
- Educate our supporters and the public about the risks associated with plant imports.
- Work with partners and volunteer citizen scientists involved in Observatree to explore how best to support surveillance and monitoring into the future.

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- Lobby Government to provide:
 - Greater support for UK sourced and grown plant material within the nursery trade.
 - A treed landscape with the best possible protection for the future by improving legislation to strengthen biosecurity at our borders and other points of entry.
 - More resources for surveillance, detection and early response to pests and diseases – both at our borders and in the wider countryside; greater efforts to educate the public on the importance of biosecurity.
 - More applied research into how to improve biosecurity at country scale.
 - Coordinated, well-resourced efforts to eradicate new pests and pathogens as they arrive, to avoid past mistakes.

Background

Tree decay and death are part of the natural cycle within woods. Trees, pests and pathogens have evolved together within woodlands and can survive harmoniously. However, this delicate balance can be lost if new pests and pathogens arrive in an area where native trees have not developed any defences and the results can be devastating. Examples of UK epidemics include Dutch elm disease, ash dieback, *Phytophthora ramorum* and oak processionary moth.

A small number of pests and pathogens are capable of spreading naturally in the wind, however the main pathway into the UK for these organisms is by inadvertent movement via the plant trade and by 'hitchhiking' in on wood products and wood-based packaging such as pallets, crates and dunnage.

During the last 30 years, the horticultural industry has developed a global business model growing plants throughout the world and then transporting and selling them through a small number of trading hubs. This has allowed growers to invest in producing particular plants knowing that the global market for them is available. This gives them continuity while reducing commercial risk. However, it has become increasingly clear that the production and movement of plants in this way has provided pests and diseases with an easy opportunity to spread globally.

Strengthening biosecurity

It is far more practical, cost effective and beneficial to the environment to prevent a pest or disease epidemic than deal with the consequences of an outbreak. The best way to do this is by ensuring that damaging organisms stay in their native range where they are in balance with the local ecosystem and not to transport them to new areas where they can cause epidemics in 'naïve' ecosystems. Despite the geographical advantage that being an island gives us, current UK biosecurity measures have not succeeded in keeping out new pests and diseases.

A fundamental overhaul of UK biosecurity legislation and its enactment are key activities if we wish to prevent further epidemics.

Many imported species of plants sold here could be grown in the UK. However, a culture change is required by consumers to both demand UKSG but also to be more acceptable of seasonal constraints - not to insist on being able to buy any plant at any time of the year. We will explain the benefits of UKSG to our supporters and the wider public to ensure they can make informed decisions when buying plants.

An assurance scheme gives consumer's confidence when looking for UKSG plants whilst enabling nurseries to build their business around UKSG. We have worked with the Government and industry to develop and support such a scheme.

We will continue to plant a wide range of native UKSG tree species on our estate and with partners and other landowners to make the UK's woodlands as resilient as possible in the face of future challenges.

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Trees planted by the Woodland Trust are sourced and grown in the UK

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The Woodland Trust, Kempton Way, Grantham, Lincolnshire NG31 6LL.

woodlandtrust.org.uk

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