

Landscape Institute Chalara Dieback of Ash survey: Report to members

Introduction

This survey was mailed to all members and ran from Wednesday 14 November to the end of Monday 19 November. A total of 310 members (5%) completed the survey, which is a very good response in such a short time. This report gives an overview of the responses.

Responses

Q1. What, if any, is your professional experience of dealing with ash dieback?

The majority of respondents (57.1%) have had no experience of dealing with Chalara dieback. A total of 34.32% had specified or planted ash in the past five years, but only 1.98% of respondents had seen disease in that planting; most were unsure of the disease status (57% of those who had specified/planted). Only 1.65% had seen evidence of Chalara dieback elsewhere in the landscape.

Q2. What have you observed?

Of the 105 respondents who completed this field, only 40 had observed any symptoms. This quote gives a general view of what some practitioners are dealing with:

“Gradual increase in awareness by Clients - some are entering panic mode, others are working with us to make contingency plans, and others are giving us scope to change schemes that already have advanced procured material sitting (stuck) on the continent. We are also looking at measures to control cross contamination if non-ash material is coming from potentially contaminated areas.”

Q3. What do you think the impact of ash dieback will be on the landscape over the next 20 years?

The expected impacts range from predictions of devastation to more sanguine assessments, while some members noted the opportunities it could provide for new planting. In addition to the visual impact of the loss of mature trees and local landmarks, themes include the impact on biodiversity and wildlife, sorrow for the loss of historic landscape, managing re-growth and replacements, the impact on urban townscape as well as hedgerows and forestry, the importance of learning from Europe, and several thoughtful comments about the impact on professional practice. Some sample quotes follow:

“Apart from the obvious predicted changes to the landscape through loss of Ash trees, from a professional LVIA perspective, the disease is likely to increase a degree of uncertainty and may potentially require considerably more site survey work than at present.”

“Potentially huge, depending on how virulent the disease proves to be in the UK ash population. The management of dead/declining mature ash trees is likely to be a significant landscape management (and safety) issue over the next decade or more. For England's strategic road network, ash has been planted to screen adjacent properties from views of the road, and to help the network integrate into the landscape. The loss of ash will open-up the roadside landscape,

and long-term consideration will need to be given to replacement planting to mitigate landscape impact. I'd imagine this effect will apply across the wider landscape. There will also be a not inconsiderable ecological impact."

"potentially devastation on a massive scale through the loss of woodland and hedgerow and amenity trees."

"Ash dieback has significant potential to alter the character and biodiversity of the British landscape - as dutch elm disease has previously/continues to do so. Uncertainty in approach in terms of control measures may also affect how people access and use the countryside, in particular woodland."

"With any luck the mature ash trees will form a resistance to the disease and we will be able to plant new ash species in sufficient numbers before too much time passes that this only shows as a blip rather than wholesale devastation. Yes current planting programmes will have to be canned, but ash is not as long lived as oak. Yes without doubt the tree most associated with Britain second only after oak is going to be badly affected but it needs to be thought of in the very long term and how we can look ahead beyond the next 20 years for all the British trees."

4. What, if any, has been your experience of dealing with similar diseases (eg. Dutch Elm)?

Many respondents had experience of Dutch Elm Disease, and draw out useful parallels in responses to this and the following question, including a reference to Oliver Rackham. For example:

"I remember seeing the hedgerows of Warwickshire change over very few years when DED took hold. Almost forty years later they still look bare and bleak. ... I remember the magnificent cathedral-like space created by the avenue of Huntingdon Elms at Hidcote Gardens and the sadness when they were removed. Sanitation felling and chemical injection seemed to have little impact in the Midlands although I know it worked to some extent elsewhere."

"The typical approach was always 'slash and burn' - very little in the way of prescriptive or preventative research was carried out and it was almost a total acceptance of there being no alternative but to allow the whole Elm population to die out. There was little effective consultation carried out outside the UK borders and little learned from experiences."

Q5. What lessons should we learn from similar diseases?

Key messages here are about specifying UK-grown stock and implementing tighter import controls. Other messages include acting quickly and decisively, heeding early warnings, the danger of monoculture, that some species are resistant so not all need to be felled, monitoring for new disease and developing an early-warning system. Several members mentioned not taking the landscape for granted.

"There is a time for swift action, and there is a time for considered response before initiating further action. The controls on planting and movement of ash, and the active destruction of

infected nursery stock/recently planted stock is clearly right. What to do beyond those controls needs to be carefully thought over the next few weeks and months. Knee-jerk action in the face of DED was often unhelpful, so we need to ensure we don't repeat this mistake.”

“That no one wants to take responsibility, no one wants to take a proactive approach - knee-jerk reactions rule the day. And finally, if there is any compensation to be handed out this will go to those wealthy enough to afford the best accountants and solicitors. Those who need it the most can whistle!”

“1 Specify British grown nursery stock wherever possible and control contract to ensure this is what is delivered. 2. Avoid planting large numbers of a limited range of tree species, as is happening on many housing schemes at present, meaning any disease will have a significant effect and will be easily spread.”

“We continue to import diseases - Elm disease, Sudden Oak death, Chestnut blight, Spruce bark, Larch disease, Beech Bark / Sooty bark etc, (plus NZ flat worm, Japanese Ladybird, Acer beetle etc). We fail to implement effective bio security by banning imports of plants and soil based organisms even when dangers are known. The reported laissez faire approach from DEFRA 'it will arrive anyway' needs eradicating as do the proponents of that policy and practice. The current and future costs to UK forestry, landscape, bio-mass industries, local authorities etc needs to be costed to bring home to officials the true cost of this sit back and do nothing approach. We were told some Elms had 'natural resistance.' These varieties which displayed this either ultimately also succumbed to sustained attacks or are still - in Scotland- on the front line and are beginning to now die. Specially bred 'alternatives' look nothing like the iconic species lost, (ie. where are the successful replacements for *Ulmus procera* 40 yrs on?). Elm in hedgerows, even where it is permitted by simplistic hedgerow management to re-grow, succumbs immediately which can result in entire hedgerow loss, (eg much of Northants today). Where are the replacement tree specimens in the wider countryside after Elm? Most places remain relatively denuded (see Somerset photos before and now).”

Q6. What are the three most important things that landscape architects should do in the fact of this crisis?

Don't panic is one of the main responses from members! The strongest messages were:

- Landscape Architects should keep themselves informed by consulting Forestry Commission and LI websites
- Stop specifying ash for the time being – though a number of members were keen to be able to plant resistant ash species to mitigate the impact on the landscape
- The importance of a diverse planting mix, and of planting UK-grown stock
- Monitor existing plantings and report any suspected disease
- Learn how to identify the disease
- Contact clients to advise on alternatives and reassure them

There is generally a strong thread of looking to the medium- and long-term, rather than knee-jerk reactions which won't necessarily improve the situation.

“Keep specifying ash, so that there is a buoyant market for the plant research and breeding organisations, followed by the commercial nurseries to respond to - perhaps led by the Forestry Commission. If we stop specifying - and that would be a classic and predictable knee-jerk reaction - it would take a lot longer for the landscape to recover than is necessary.”

Q7. What three things would you most like LI to do?

Members see the strongest roles for the Landscape Institute as being:

1. Providing information and practical advice to members
2. Lobbying government for an effective response now **and** long-term bio-security
3. Supporting research
4. Championing the use of native-grown stock
5. Formulating new policies and guidance for landscape architects in the light of ash dieback
6. Providing training on disease identification and management

Some members were impressed by the Institute's response:

“I am impressed with the prompt response to date, so firstly don't take your foot off the pedal, we are listening out here and advice is keenly sought.”

as well as some brickbats about the LI not responding fast enough. Generally, there was an emphasis on long-term solutions: prevention of future disease outbreaks, and the education of landscape architects, policy makers and other stakeholders:

“Start using issue to talk about landscape character in the media. Be the only voice of reason and focus briefings on ways to stop this happening again.”

“EDUCATE LAs (who are responsible for specification of trees) about the dangers of planting monoculture avenues of trees and over reliance on a small list of favoured trees!”

Q8. What should the government's top three priorities be?

There was a clear message that the government's top three priorities should be:

1. Improving bio-security, including import controls (212)
2. Developing resistance to the disease in native UK ash population (169)
3. Researching other species at risk (116)

The only other issue that scored highly was 'Advice on reducing the rate of spread' (107). Comments included: all actions are important, set up a quarantine system, act quickly, listen to the experts, support UK tree production, promote planting of native stock, focus on the future as there may be little we can

do to contain the disease now, the difficulty of isolating an airborne disease, the importance of landscape professionals in the public sector and of government funding, especially for research.

“Stop the decline in landscape architects, arboriculturalists and ecologists in public sector employment! They are the people on the ground who can contribute most to dealing with the problem. Put together strategies for all common trees which might be vulnerable to this or other diseases, and also for generally increasing resilience in UK trees and woodlands. Why weren't they ahead of the game in this case, since it was known to be a risk?”

“Establish an effective system for identifying disease well in advance and tracking the spread and impacts and developing a plan for control or compensation/mitigation measures if any disease proves damaging and unstoppable.”

Q9. Have you identified any other species at risk from this or similar diseases?

The species most often mentioned as being at risk from disease is Horse Chestnut (Bleeding Canker & Macedonia Moth ; 25 mentions), followed by Oak (Sudden Oak Death & Oak Processionary Moth; 23 mentions) and Phytophthora ramorum in Larch (10 mentions). Others commented on the effect of warmer, wetter weather in increasing disease, the threat of Sweet Chestnut blight, Red needle blight, Pseudomonas bacterial infections in Acer, Horse Chestnut & Alder, the persistence of Dutch Elm Disease, and the need for guidance on the risk of Chalara in garden species such as lilac and privet.

“It seems that every few years a new disease crosses the seas to find a new home in Britain. We rightly get worried--about oaks, horse chestnuts, and now larches and ashes. We lose greater or lesser numbers, eg. lots of Aesculus are now dead or dying. Yet, thankfully, we still have a hugely healthy population of trees. Many areas of Britain have more trees now than they did in 1900, in spite of elm disease and hedgerow clearance. Others are much more bare. These are the areas where elm was ubiquitous, in my observation.”

“Horse Chestnut. Bleeding Red Canker. I have seen a lot of poor mature chestnuts this last 6 months. They seemed to suffer badly in the drought of 2011 and this year leaf loss started very early. Our climate is certainly changing and they clearly don't like it. Sorbus aucuparia again are not doing well in the Midlands, maybe because of drought in previous years. Beech, Alder and Birch this year seemed to do very well with good growth and foliage cover.”

Q10. Do you have any other observations?

This section drew a wide and interesting range of comments on subjects including bio-security and imported stock, climate change, avoiding monocultures, the need for government to act more promptly on expert advice, and the importance of research. Members drew attention to lessons for landscape character:

“I'm concerned generally that in the UK countryside there is heavy reliance on just a few species... There is not a lot of resilience, in terms of landscape character. The Landscape Institute could, at any seminars and workshops organised, introduce discussions about how

diversity could be increased without perceived adverse effect on local character. In future landscape character assessments, which need to include urban character assessments too, as there are relatively few which do, the issue of tree species and risk needs to be addressed. Most LCAs are very vague about tree species.”

And the reaction of local authorities:

“...Government cuts to local authority maintenance budgets will not help. Newcastle is proposing to remove all its street trees where maintenance is difficult i.e. central reservations and will not be replacing any trees in the city that die. It is also proposing to remove all shrubs from public spaces and replace with paving or grass...”

Some are elegiac in tone:

“On a personal note, I can fully understand why we had to destroy all the ash trees at Birstall Park and Ride even though it was only the feathered stock that were displaying symptoms of Chalara. However, it was very sad to have to remove hundreds of healthy looking young transplant ash and several healthy heavy standard Fraxinus excelsior "Westof's Glorie". The ash trees are now being replaced with alternative species, however, without ash in the planting mix, as the scheme matures, the overall appearance will not look typical of Leicestershire.”

There was recognition for the role of the Landscape Institute:

“I feel that the LI is being very proactive over this issue. Keep it up. We are ambassadors for the landscape industry.”

And an emphasis on a pragmatic long-term approach, promoting more sustainable practice and policy:

“We really need to be looking to the future rather than squandering resources of trying to slow the spread. If it is here to stay we have to spend resources on recovery i.e. there's little point in closing the stable door, so let's go and catch the horse or find a new one.”

“The practice of sending the original seeds of native trees to the continent to be grown in intensive farms (because this is the 'cheaper' method) only to be reintroduced into the country, should be outlawed. ... Encourage economists to factor in transport costs in the price of things!”

“It is good that Chalara has received such widespread media attention; but much of it has been alarmist and over the top. ... We all love ash and should try to save it, but if it goes the way of the elm we have to move on and deal with the species that are left to us. In view of the movement of people and plants around the globe it seems likely that the tree landscape of the UK will be a much more rapidly-changing one in the future.”

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