

## Trees

In the early days of ecology there developed the idea of ‘succession’ – every habitat would progress through various stages until a climax vegetation settled the whole matter. The idea of succession still remains but it’s become apparent that it’s a much more chaotic and unpredictable process than was at first imagined; we may well have a predominance of oak in one particular place, or beech, or pine and so on but that doesn’t necessarily mean it was preordained by the geology or climate, and, in these islands, the human factor has, of course, also played a significant part.

What’s become apparent to me living in Turvey and attempting to cultivate a monastic garden is that trees of all sorts quickly take over if not weeded just like any other weed.

A recent walk around the walled garden produced the following list of freebooters: yew, oak, spindle, hawthorn, field maple, sycamore, ash, hazel, willow, elder, plum, walnut, holly, blackthorn and horse chestnut. Or, more accurately: ash, yew, ash, oak, ash, spindle, ash and so on. Ash was everywhere while the others were largely singletons – except for the sycamore and walnut. Where did they come from so suddenly, or do I need to get out more? And how did they get over the wall almost it seems overnight? Should I cull them or leave them? Some of them will grow to be significant trees and all are beautiful. But it’s a shared walled garden and while we have the labour we can cultivate it in other ways; allow it to grow lettuce, potatoes, Swiss chard, beetroot, onions and tomatoes.

So I compromise and dig up the ash, the many ash, and the sycamore and the walnut trees. The first need no help out there, at least not yet, and the walnut can be sold on, but as for the rest we’ll let them live another day, especially as Oliver Rackham is convinced that hazel is no longer regenerating in the wild because of grey squirrels and willow is rather good for moths in the spring and the plums are small but delicious.

This natural ability of trees to spread themselves around puts plantations in a whole new perspective. So often we could leave nature to do the job for us but our need to control takes over - and the need for subsidies and employment! Mind you, once the trees do take hold it can be the devil of a job to get rid of them. Apart from pines, Oliver Rackham is also convinced that most trees are extremely difficult to kill off. Hence the productive life of a coppiced or pollarded tree can span many centuries.

So we'll keep an eye on the ones remaining and let the birds come and nest and feed in their shade, and if we have the labour we'll have the occasional cull but, if not, we can let the dark wood take over. Whose wood is it anyway, and whose garden? Or in the words of Katherine Swift,

'It's Liberty Hall here ... I'm only the referee.'

(p.208 The Morville Hours)

Br.John



