



Wild service trees

One of the things we are planning to do this year is to survey and map wild service trees (*Sorbus torminalis*) in the parish. This attractive tree, with its masses of white flowers in the spring (it is flowering as I write this in early May) and its russet leaves in the autumn, is not uncommon here but it would be interesting to find out more about its distribution.

In 1974 the Botanical Society of the British Isles and the Biological Records Centre carried out a survey of the species because it is typical of ancient and undisturbed lowland primary woodland and because knowledge of its locations would help recognise primary woodland for conservation purposes. The findings of the survey revealed that it is typically a tree of lowland Britain; it does not occur north of the southern Lake District in the west or North Yorkshire in the east. It is rare in more northern counties but the Sussex, Kent and Surrey Weald is one of its main strongholds. It particularly favours clay soils and thrives on Weald Clay, of which Plumpton has an abundance.

In more southern counties of its range, especially in Kent, it was valued for its fruits until quite recent times. The small brown berries are hard and bitter at first but with age they 'blet' (begin to rot) and become sweet and soft and are said to taste of apricot, sultana, damson and tamarind. The alternative name of Chequers gave its name to inns where the berries were once used to flavour a cider-like alcoholic beverage. In the areas where it was valued, it was not only protected but also planted so its presence may not always indicate an ancient woodland site. That evidence would have to be supported by the presence of several more of the 1000 ancient woodland indicator species recorded for south east England.

We planted a tree in our garden 25 years ago and, although it has flowered profusely in recent years, we are still waiting to see the fruits. This may be either because the birds get to them first or because the tree needs long hot summers to form fruits with abundant seeds. Birds eating the fruit also digest the thin-coated seeds so it is not usually bird-sown. The tree seldom generates from seed for these reasons but also because, like many members of the rose family to which it belongs, the seed needs about three months of near freezing conditions before it will germinate.

The wild service tree has another strategy for maintaining itself; it sends up suckers quite easily, especially where it grows in banks, and often one finds clusters of these trees together, all originating from one original parent. Some research in Epping Forest in Essex found that the majority of older wild service trees – estimated to be about 200 years old – were of sucker origin.

Do you have a wild service tree in your garden? Do you know of the existence of others that you see on your walks? We would love to have your records please. The trees are easy to identify when in leaf.

Records should include a grid reference if possible, a named location so that we can record it on a map, habitat (woodland, hedgerow, garden) and whether it is a single specimen or a cluster.

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