

Yew

(*Taxus baccata* L.)

Distribution & Provenance

The yew is one of only two conifers that are native to Ireland, the other being juniper. The species has a natural range from southern Scandinavia to the Mediterranean and from Ireland to the Ural mountains. It is a very variable species with lots of different provenances and clones displaying different growth characteristics and shape. The seed for virtually all yew planted in Ireland is collected locally.



Natural distribution of yew

Silviculture & Management in Ireland

Yew is a highly adaptable species that will grow on both acid and lime rich neutral or alkaline soils. However, on alkaline sites, it is dependent on the availability of a nutrient rich humus layer. It prefers a good free draining soil but again, is quite versatile and can find anchor in the most unlikely places such as the Burren in Co. Clare where it grows more as a low bush than as a tree. Planting of yew for timber production requires careful selection of an appropriate seed source as the species is highly variable in terms of stem form, branchiness and vigour. Yew does not do well on exposed sites and very rarely grows to a height greater than 20 metres. It is a light demander and, given favourable conditions, can grow in diameter (at breast height) by up to 0.5 centimetre per year.

Fresh yew leaves and bark are highly palatable to herbivores, particularly deer, and considerable damage can be caused by their browsing. However, cut yew foliage is poisonous to animals and yew berries are poisonous to humans.

Non Timber Benefits

The bark of the yew tree contains Taxol, a very powerful anti cancer drug. Taxol has been demonstrated in trials to be effective against ovarian, skin, breast and colon cancer. Because of its complex structure, chemical synthesis of Taxol is currently not possible and the only source of this material is the bark of the yew tree. The fresh leaves and bark of the yew tree are a popular food for many different herbivores. Similarly, the yew berry is an important food source for many species of birds and wood mice in particular. As one of Ireland's only two native conifers and because of its extraordinary longevity, yew has a very high heritage value.



Mature, free standing yew



Yew sprig showing berries

YEW (TAXUS baccata L.)

Position in Irish Forestry

Yew is not planted commercially in Irish forestry. However, Irish foresters and other scientists are exploring methods of growing yew for the production of Taxol. Yew is a common species found in many native Irish woodlands. However, it is more frequently seen as a planted tree, as opposed to a naturally seeded tree, in urban or suburban settings. The remains of some impressive estate avenues of yew can still be seen, for example at Kilmacurra, Co. Wicklow. Yews have been associated with places of sanctuary in Irish history and are commonly found planted in church yards. Newry and Youghal are anglicised versions of its Irish name, lúr. Similarly, Terenure in Dublin is the anglicised version of Tír an lúr, the country of the yew. Yew was highly placed in the Celtic classification of trees and shrubs.



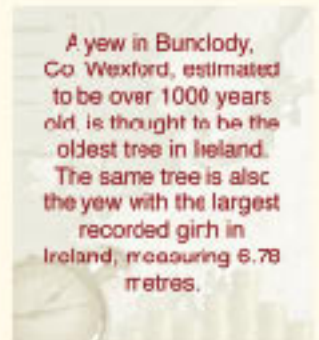
Yew is commonly found in graveyards

Uses & Markets

Although yew, as a conifer, is classified as a softwood, it is in fact harder and heavier than most commercial hardwoods. The timber varies in colour from a light toffee tan to rich red. These colours, allied with a characteristically distorted and swirling grain make it a particularly attractive timber for turned craft products such as ornamental bowls, lamp stands and door handles. Traditionally, yew was the timber used in the manufacture of archery bows but these are now made from synthetic materials. Worked bog yew is highly valued for wood sculpture.

Further Information

Further information on growing yew can be obtained from your local Forest Service Inspector or any Professional Forester.



Yew is a prized timber amongst wood turners

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