

ASH DIEBACK

HOW TO DEAL WITH IT

Ash dieback (Chalara) is a disease affecting ash trees; it's a fungal pathogen which causes severe leaf loss and crown dieback. This can either kill the tree or make it more susceptible to other fungi which, in turn, cause its demise.

It was first spotted in the UK in 2012, although it's now believed that it had been present for longer, and is now endemic throughout England and large parts of Wales. It's been widespread in Europe for much longer.

The severity of the disease, in terms of spread of infection and the rate of degradation on individual trees, is much worse than it was originally thought.

HOW CAN I SPOT IT?

There are various symptoms that affected trees will display. Initially the disease will affect the leaves, which will turn brown and fall prematurely. Over time, this will continue onto the branch, causing dieback of the whole canopy. There may also be diamond-shaped lesions on the branch; in more extreme cases, these would also appear at the base of the trunk.

WHAT IS THE RESULT?

As ash dieback (or the secondary pathogens) takes hold of the trees, it can affect the structural integrity of the tree, which can result in branches or, in severe cases, the entire tree falling. The dangers associated with this vary depending on the location of the affected tree, with trees alongside roads or footpaths presenting a higher risk.

WHAT ACTION SHOULD OR CAN BE TAKEN?

If there is any sign of the disease, a tree survey should be carried out and professional advice should be sought.

We recommend, even if there are no visible signs, that anyone who owns or manages ash should get a tree survey carried out on trees which are within a tree's height of a road or footpath. If a tree survey has been carried out in the last few years, the surveyor will have identified any ash dieback and suggested remedial works or monitoring. However, a lot of those will have been done before the speed of the infection and thus its structural degradation of the ash was fully known, so it's advisable to update the survey, and it may be necessary to reconsider your approach.

ROADS AND FOOTPATHS

Where ash on roadsides or alongside footpaths is showing more than 25% canopy dieback, the common position is that it should be removed as quickly as possible – however, it may be that the safest option is to remove any such ash, including healthy trees, to eliminate risk completely.

SHOOTS

Even where ash is in areas that are not accessible to the public, it may still pose a risk to beaters during the shoot season.

Gamekeepers may consider changing the shoot so that beaters do not have to go into areas with high levels of ash.

LOWER RISK AREAS

In lower risk areas, ash can be left to allow trees which may be tolerant to be identified. It is thought that a small percentage of trees are tolerant, and these may allow future regeneration of ash in the UK.

TIMBER

There is no reason that timber from affected trees can't be used or sold as normal and in many cases the removal of ash plantations may prove a cost positive operation due to the strong demand for fire and chip wood.

REPLANTING AND REGENERATION

There are grants available for replanting and regeneration of larger areas of ash that have had to be removed. Restocking payments of up to £2,750 per hectare are available via the Woodland Tree Health Restoration Grant in certain circumstances. We recommend that any re-planting is with a diverse species mix to ensure future resilience to pests and diseases.

IS THERE A PROCESS TO FOLLOW?

Legally, you need a felling licence to cut down ash. In some cases, where there are individual or groups of high risk trees and depending on the woodland officer, authorisation will be given after providing photos of the degradation and a location plan – others will still require a formal application, and if the trees are within a conservation area, then the prior notification procedure must be followed.

Infected trees should be treated with extreme caution, as the disease can render them very brittle and susceptible to limb drop. Trees showing signs of dieback should not, under any circumstance, be climbed and hand felling of larger trees should be carried out only when absolutely necessary; a mobile elevating work platform (MEWP) should be used wherever possible. Where a professional tree surgeon is contracted to fell the trees, they should provide a written risk assessment and method statement to confirm that risks are minimised.

SUMMARY

Anyone who owns or manages ash is urged to regularly monitor all ash trees, particularly those alongside roads or footpaths, and to revisit their tree surveys. Professional advice should be sought if there are any signs of the ash dieback.

For more information, please contact Oliver Mead:

01225 747243
oliver.mead@carterjonas.co.uk