

woodlands and trees

Brief History of Woodlands

On your travels in West Cork, carry a bag of acorns and apple pips to seed the ditches. The sparse cover in much of the region is a temporary gap for cold winter winds.



After the Ice Age, trees gradually encroached upon the grassland that first grew there. Then the first human settlers slowly began to clear the woods, until eventually a timber shortage became apparent by 8AD. From the 16th century onwards, the clearing of woods intensified with little replanting. Even today, the area of Ireland under forestry is only 7% and of this only a mere 5% is deciduous.

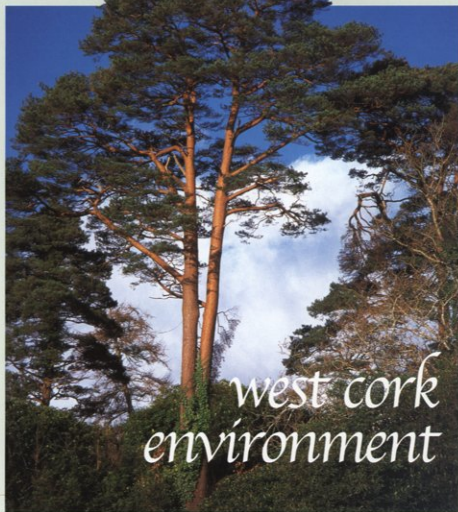
Old Woodlands in West Cork

The Glengarriff Woods were still extensive at the beginning of



Tree cover on the Bandon - Dunmanway Road.

the 17th Century. It was from these that O'Sullivan Beare set out in 1602 to Leitrim. The woodlands here are still composed mainly of Sessile oak, with some birch and rowan. Other trees include yew, holly, Scots pine and beech. Some plants in the woods grow only in the south west of Ireland and in Spain and Portugal. These Hiberno-Lusitanian species include the Irish spurge, the greater



west cork
environment





Young sycamore trees make their way towards the light, amid a thick mat of bluebells near Enniskeane.

butterwort and two species of saxifrage. The Strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*) also grows here, far from its usual home in the Mediterranean.

The Oak

The Oak is one of our finest trees and has long characterised Ireland's forests. Its majestic spreading canopy, wrinkled trunk and leaf littered woodland floor, provide a habitat for hundreds of species of flora and fauna.

Woodland Walks

Coillte Teoranta usually provide facilities for public access to their coniferous woods. In West Cork these include Ballinspittle, Currabinnny and Glengarriff.

The existence of woodlands is often reflected in the place-names of West Cork. For example, Clonakilty derives from Cloch na Coillte, the Stone of the Woods.

Trees in Hedgerows

Hedgerows provide not only barriers to livestock and demarcation for landowners, but also a shelter from the

elements for the crops and animals within their boundaries. Trees in hedgerows provide extra height and thus additional shelter for fields. They also provide leaf-litter which helps to build up soil over hundreds of years.

The well established network of ditches in West Cork provides a space for native hardwood trees. The wider and wilder the ditch, the more diversity there will generally be.

Woodland Ecology

On the floor of deciduous woods, mats of wildflowers pop up in spring before the trees come into leaf and use the precious

sun light. Here too, the ferns unfurl their fronds to grasp the dappled light that remains. The shrub layer has the elderflowers for syrup and wild roses with their flowers and bright hips, as well as hoverflies and hosts of butterflies.

The Canopy is home to the woodland birds - siskin, gold crest, blue tit and others, as well as the hosts of insects that they eat.

In the ground layer fungi, beetles, centipedes and others have the whole forest floor in which to claim territories. In mature woodlands the largest organism in the forest may not be the mighty oak, but a fungus. Fungi can spread via thread-like hyphae to inhabit an entire forest ground layer, eventually weighing much more than any single oak tree.

Hollow trees can shelter bats over winter. The whiskered bat is an endangered species of bat found in West Cork. Bats can help to control insects, some of which are crop pests. A pipistrelle, the smallest, is able to eat over 3000 midges and mosquitoes a night during the summer.



Rhododendron bushes with foxglove at Bantry House.

Traditional Skills

Like many traditional skills, basketry combines beauty with usefulness. Traditionally, the oldest member of the household would weave baskets for firewood or turf, while master weavers would take on the more intricate tasks. Basket making and coppicing, the cutting of the willow to encourage tall thin rods or sallows, are both becoming popular as many traditional crafts are being used again, such as these willow rods and baskets made by Martin and Yvon O'Flynn in Kealkil, Bantry.



Action - Tree Planting

It is easy to plant trees from acorns or chestnuts. Just collect the seeds from the ground under a tree in the autumn and put them on some freshly raked and weeded soil or in a pot. Cover with a little soil and water well. In spring, shoots will appear and after a few years the trees will be ready to plant out to their final position. Watch the tree grow over the years and the wildlife it attracts.