

English Yew

Taxus baccata

Our recent holiday was our third trip to the UK and we visited the Westonbirt Arboretum for the third time. It is a large and very beautiful Arboretum near the town of Tetbury, north of Bath and some 160 Km west of London. The arboretum was established in 1829 and it has a number of very large significant trees. It covers an area of 600 acres and has over 3000 different species of trees and shrubs, many of which are endangered. It is considered to be one of the most spectacular tree gardens in the world. We visited the arboretum with wood collecting friends, Brian and Jessie Young who are also "Friends of the Arboretum". A large number of Yew trees were planted as a hedge in its early development, and recently many have been removed. The "Friends" have been collecting much of the Yew and selling it as a fund raising programme. It is a beautiful timber.



While doing some research about Yew, I came across an interesting article about the Mystical Yew, in "The Complete Book of Trees of Britain and Europe" by Tony Russell. The following quote on page 34 attributed to Robert Turner and written in 1664 amused me - *"If the yew be set in a place subject to poisonous vapours, the very branches will draw and imbibe them, hence... ...the judicious in former times planted it in churchyards on the west side, because those places were ... fuller of putrefaction and gross oleaginous vapours exhaled out of graves by the setting sun"*.

It is therefore interesting to discover that Yew trees are typically found in church grave yards, many on the western side. However there are opposing views to this gruesome picture, including a view that the Druids believed that the Yews evergreen foliage represented eternal life and they became associated with places of worship. Centuries later when Christianity arrived it is thought that Christians chose those sites to build their churches. Perhaps this is the reason why Yews are still commonly associated with churches even modern ones.

Derivation of names

Taxus - the ancient Latin name for the evergreen Yew.

baccata - berry bearing - the common Yew.

Other names Common Yew, Irish Yew, European Yew.

Related Species

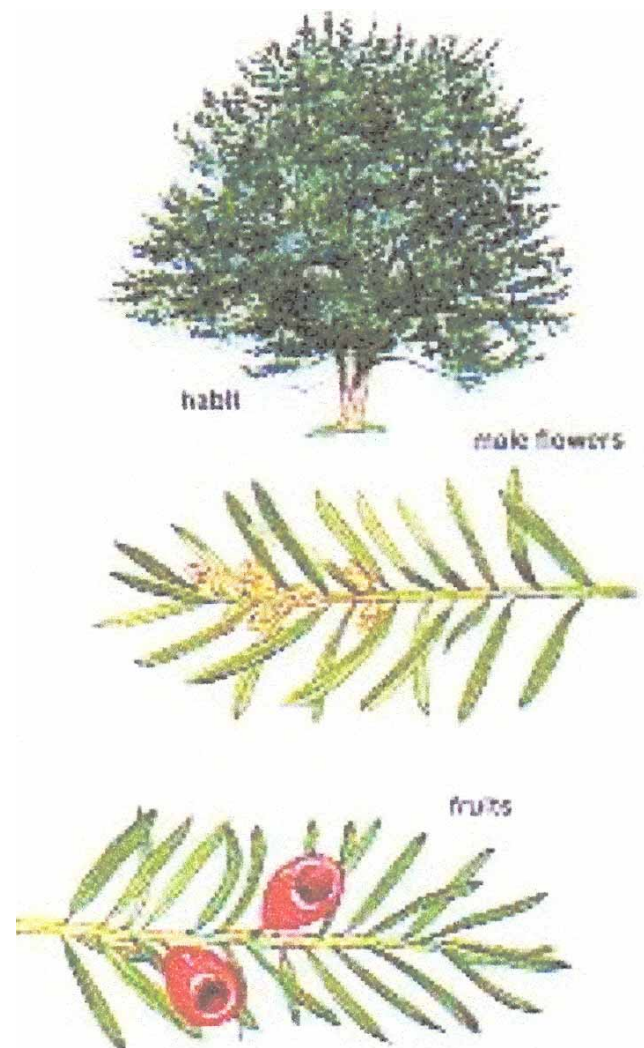
Himalayan Yew (*T. wallichiana*), Japanese Yew (*T. cuspidata*), Pacific Yew (*T. brevillia*). In addition there are many cultivars of the Yew.

The Tree

Yew is a very long lived tree and there are many trees in England alone that are thought to be over 1000 years old. Some of these ancient species are reported to have a trunk of up to 4 metres, although they are so convoluted and hollow that little valuable wood is available. It is a beautiful tree with a dense and bright green crown. Yew is a medium sized tree growing up to 20 metres but the form is variable and usually has short poorly formed and deeply fluted trunks. The bark is thin and scaly, brown in colour. It feels soft to touch and usually comes off in flakes.

The leaves are very similar to those of Oregon (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) being pointed needle like leaves, 30 to 40 mm long and spirally on the stem. They are a bright glossy green above with yellowish streaks below. Although they appear to be prickly, the leaves are soft to the touch.

Yews are *dioecious*, i.e. having male and female flowers on separate trees.



The fruit are small soft berries, turning scarlet in colour when ripe. They enclose dark poisonous seeds.

Most parts of the Yew tree are toxic.

Habitat

All of Great Britain, Europe, eastwards to Iran and in the Atlas mountains of North Africa.

Timber

Yew has a beautiful timber. It has a pinkish brown heartwood which contrasts sharply with the pale creamish white sapwood. The trunk has a myriad of small branches which often produces a large number of small knots, which provides an attractive figure. The deeply fluted trunk also produces interesting figure with sweeping contrasting colours. The timber is hard strong and durable and therefore suitable for outdoor work. It has a fine grain and is an excellent turning timber. In bow making, the staves were selected such that the pale sapwood is on the outside of the bow and the darker heartwood is on the inside. The sapwood is elastic which allows the bow to stretch and the heartwood is able to withstand compression, allowing the bow to return to its original position after bending.



YEW and the LONGBOW

Yew is always associated with the history of the longbow and the exploits of the English archers. As most Yew trees lack straight grain only selected trees are suitable to make longbows. Therefore the need to find suitable material was always an issue, indeed the first documented import of Yew bowstaves was as early as 1294 and in the late 15th century all ships entering English ports were required to bring 4 bowstaves. The search for suitable bowstaves was a continual issue for the next several centuries.

Ron Allen