

## Caring For Yews

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### ***The Sacred Yew Appendix 1: Caring for Yews (abridged)***

Many people enquire as to how they can best take care of the yew tree in their local church or elsewhere. Guidelines for doing this have been drawn up according to the many years' experience of experts in the care of trees, and these are set out below. The main points of the guidelines are that a yew tree has great potential for regeneration, that the most decrepit-looking tree may be far from dead, and that the least amount of interference is likely to give the tree the best chance of thriving.

First, though, it may be interesting to look briefly at two very different approaches, or attitudes, to how we treat our trees.

In about 1770 the yew tree in the churchyard at Buckland-in-Dover was struck by lightning. It split and shattered, and in doing so demolished the church steeple. Fortunately the yew was not cleared away, despite the fact that half of the trunk was lying on the ground, and the whole of the tree including the fallen section carried on living. Just over a hundred years later it was deemed necessary to extend the church, but the yew was in the way. The rector and parishioners were not willing to destroy the tree, even though its aged form was described at the time as 'rude and grotesque'. Instead, they decided to carry out a tremendous feat, and to move the tree 60 feet away from the church:

The operation commenced on the 24th February when a trench was dug on all four sides, four feet wide and five feet deep, and leaving a large block of earth, 18 ft by 16ft broad, and a long cutting was formed from the old position to the new one. Much work with huge planks of timber, chains, rollers and windlasses took place before the whole mass of the tree, estimated at 55 tons, began to move. It arrived within a yard of its destination at dusk on the 4th March. (*Parish magazine, 1880*)

This astonishing piece of engineering, without the aid of the mechanical equipment of today, was successful. Nor was it an isolated incident; the man in charge of the work, Mr William Baron, perfected the technique to the extent that he 'built' a much admired garden at Elvaston Castle by planting it with mature trees. The Buckland-in-Dover yew, which is very unusual in being both male and female, still flourishes today. The 1987 hurricane partially damaged it, but extra supports were put in, and the tree continues to be rightly prized.

Compare this with what happened a century later. In 1993 a plan to reconstruct the Privy Gardens at Hampton Court Palace was announced. To go back to the eighteenth-century design would, it was said by the scheme's backers, necessitate cutting down thirty-eight 300-year-old yew trees. Although this was not the palace gardens' original design, it was deemed to be sufficiently important for the yews, which had grown too big to fit the 'correct' pattern, to be destroyed. Conservationists, including Allen argued that this was a priority of madness, and that the trees could be removed, or reduced in height and frequently clipped. The idea of relocating the trees was ruled out by the proponents as unlikely to succeed, despite considerable evidence to the contrary such as that the ancient Egyptians are known to have moved large trees around. With some kind of bizarre logic, clippings were taken from the old trees, to be replanted when they have grown in ten years' time. The trees were felled, providing a sad comment on our alleged new-found concern for conserving trees, especially old ones.

### *Protecting and caring for ancient yews*

It is of paramount importance that no *Taxus baccata* yew should be cut down or removed from a churchyard, even when it appears 'dead'. No yew tree can be considered dead. The remains of old trunks should be cared for and protected; they can be several thousand years old and may still come to life again years from now.



The Llanwrin Yew, cut down in 1984, lives again from its ancient 27' stump

A great deal of energy is stored in the tree's branches, particularly with ancient yew, as opposed to being concentrated solely in the ground root system. This means that the tree can regrow by sending an aerial root down inside a hollow trunk or by embedding branches in the ground. Unfortunately many branches which would have reached to the ground and rooted are cut off in the mistaken belief that they are dangerous or take up too much space. If they are allowed to remain they will act as an anchor and support for the main trunk; the cutting of these branches will only result later in very expensive and unnecessary tree surgery. When large branches are cut back. It immediately weakens the tree; it can cause the tree to split; the tree becomes vulnerable to severe storms; and remaining branches are put at risk.

The result of such human interferences can be seen in ancient yews around the country, where metal braces have been used to hold the tree together, and wooden props act as crutches to support the tree. Ideally the amputation of large limbs should never be necessary, although support with poles and posts, strapping or binding may sometimes be helpful in order to avoid loss of limbs or splitting of the trunk.

Hollow yews, and cavities in yews, should never be filled with concrete or any other substance, as this not only is unsightly but adds unnecessary weight and stress to the tree and will inhibit the growth of aerial roots. No wood, old or new, should be removed from inside hollow yews, and hollow yews should never be used for storing oil tanks, coal and so on.

Fungus sometimes appears on yew trees. The yellow *Polyporus sulphurous* can be removed or scraped off, but it is not a great danger to the yew unless really out of control. Ivy, however, should be removed, as it can weaken the tree's system, and its weight makes the tree more vulnerable to storm damage. Elder, brambles, etc, should also be removed from around the trunk, as they can hide the beauty of the tree.

The growth of small shoots surrounding the trunk can be trimmed so that the trunk is visible. Among other benefits of this is that it prevents the tree from taking on the appearance of a bush and hence being regarded as an eyesore and a dumping ground.

To summarise, a yew tree will live longer with the minimal amount of human interference. Tree surgery should almost never be necessary. Even if a tree falls, resist the temptation to clear it away immediately; as Oliver Rackham points out: 'As a habitat, a fallen tree (alive or dead) is better than any tree planted as a replacement. Tidiness is death to conservation.' He also stresses that trees are hard to kill, and fallen trees very often do regrow.