

# Recognising an Ash Tree in winter

One of the commonest hedgerow and woodland trees in Gloucestershire is the Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*).

The easiest way to recognise an Ash tree, especially in winter, is to look at the leaf buds at the end of the twigs which are black as soot – Ash/Soot – it is a good mnemonic. Nothing else you are likely to come across in the Gloucestershire countryside has this feature. The buds are in pairs and are usually well-spaced along the twigs with the next pair at right angles to the first.

It is possible to recognise an Ash tree in silhouette from a considerable distance. It reaches upwards, letting a lot of light through the branches, quite unlike the dense scribbly pillows of oak, for example, where the buds are crowded at the end of the twigs.

In good light, the trunk of a young Ash will be seen to have remarkably smooth pale grey bark, and even as it ages it does not take on the cragginess of oak.

Ash has winged fruits known as keys, which hang in fist-sized bunches through the winter on some trees. It blooms early in the year, with small dark pompoms of flowers opening before the tree comes into leaf.

Looking underneath the tree there are likely to be fallen leaves. The leaf of the ash is pinnate, meaning that it has a central stalk with leaflets coming off this along its length. However, the leaflets often fall separately, so you may see a lot of 20-30cm leaf stalks looking like straw until examined carefully when the leaflet scar becomes apparent.

There are many other little clues that indicate Ash. In Gloucestershire, it does not support Mistletoe and a grey barked tree with Mistletoe is likely to be a poplar. Ash is pretty much the best species in Gloucestershire for lichens (it has a high bark pH which buffers against acid pollution) so a tree seen to have a blotchy trunk from a distance might well be Ash. Ash is the usual host for the Cramp Ball fungus, *Daldinia concentrica*, also known as King Alfred's Cakes.

Ash Die-back caused by the fungus *Chalara fraxinea* is killing Ash trees across eastern and northern Europe (in Sweden more than 50% have noticeable damage). It was reported in Britain in 2012, initially in imported stock in tree nurseries, but then in October it was found in wild Ashes in East Anglia. I have not yet heard of its occurrence in Gloucestershire, and let us hope that we are spared, but meanwhile get to know your local Ashes, watch them through the year, and enjoy them while you can.

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