**Native Black Poplar Project – would you like to help?**



Native black poplar is one of our rarest trees. We are developing a project to improve its conservation in Castlemorton and potentially in the neighbouring Parishes.

We want to encourage planting of native black poplars in suitable locations and to get a better understanding of the number and condition of native black poplars beyond Castlemorton Common itself.

- Could you give a home to a native black poplar?
- Do you think you have a native black poplar on your land and want to know more about it?
- Would you be interested in helping with the project?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then please get in touch with Castlemorton Environment Group.
info@ceg.castlemorton.org.uk

**Native black poplar in South Worcestershire**

Castlemorton Common and surrounding area is notable for the concentration of pollarded native black poplars which are a distinctive part of the landscape. (Pollarding is the practice of cutting the trees above the level of grazing animals.) If we were choosing an iconic tree as a symbol of the Parish it would probably be the black poplar!

Native black poplar is related to, but should not be confused with, the widely planted Lombardy poplar and hybrid black poplars. Native black poplar is resistant to mistletoe – so a black poplar with mistletoe is almost certainly a hybrid!

Black poplar is a majestic, spreading, broad crowned tree with a distinctive burred trunk. The twigs are usually a distinctive orange colour and in early Spring the trees are covered in crimson catkins adding a splash of colour to the landscape. Male and female catkins are found on separate trees. It is generally found as a field tree, often beside ponds and water courses.

**History of use and planting**

Before the introduction of hybrid black poplars in the 19th century native black poplars were planted for their timber and the crop of poles. The timber is lightweight and springy and was used for planking, floorboards, brake blocks, bean poles, thatching spars and even a clutch of arrows found on the Elizabethan galleon the Mary Rose. Boards are heat resistant and were said to be favoured for the floors of oast houses and ammunition boxes! Trees that have not been cut usually develop a lean and have arched branches growing naturally into the shapes used in cruck-framed buildings. On Castlemorton Common trees may have been pollarded for animal fodder as well as their wood and provided summer shade for grazing animals.

Writing in the late 17th century one author tells his readers "You that have wet grounds get some Water Poplar to set by your ditches .... ,for if you set one worth a half penny, if they grow they will bring you that yearly for twenty years or more". John Evelyn (1664) describes how to propagate the tree by truncheons, seven to eight feet long, but Hunter (1776) prefers cuttings planted out in nurseries, and mentions sides of rivulets, bogs, pasture-grounds and fields as suitable sites for planting out. Most of the trees in the landscape are males which have been propagated by cuttings. Until recent biodiversity schemes few were planted after the mid 19th century.

**Conservation**

Worcestershire is thought to be home for about 15% of the UK population of native black poplar. The wet floodplain conditions that the trees like would have been greatly reduced by agricultural improvement and land drainage. Most trees are ancient and despite recent planting schemes the population structure is very unbalanced. This makes it important to continue planting at intervals to establish a succession of different aged poplars. Because propagation has been by cuttings there is an imbalance in the proportion of males v females and local populations are genetically similar.

The Malvern Hills Trust is actively conserving native black poplars on their land by pollarding trees and planting new trees. They are increasing the genetic diversity of black make them more resilient to climate change and disease by introducing some including females from outside the area.

But elsewhere in the Parish there is a need to look at planting native black poplars if we want to maintain this distinctive tree in the wider landscape. Castlemorton Environment Group is looking to set up a black poplar project and wants to know what interest there would be from private landowners in Castlemorton and surrounding Parishes.

**Could you give a home to a native black poplar?**

We hope to have native black poplar cuttings later this winter for growing on or planting out. These are large trees with a root system that can take up large volumes of water, so think carefully whether you have sufficient room. (It is not recommended that poplars are planted within 35 metres of properties especially on clay soils.)

They should be planted in locations that are damp to wet and grown as small groups or individual trees rather than as part of a woodland. The shoots are palatable and will need substantial protection from grazing animals – especially horses - if they are to grow.

We are looking into the feasibility of providing both male and female saplings. It would be great if people were to take a pair and plant a male and a female in proximity – within 10-15 metres of each other. But be aware that the female trees produce a lot of downy seed that may be untidy in garden locations – so better suited to paddocks and fields than gardens.

If you are interested and think you have a suitable site for black poplar get in touch with Castlemorton Environment Group so we can gauge the likely level of interest. info@ceg.castlemorton.org.uk

**Further reading**

Richard Mabey – Flora Britannica 1996

Worcestershire Biodiversity Action Plan, Black Poplar Species Action Plan 2018