Castlemorton Environmental Group
Native Black Poplar Project

Black Poplar Planting Guide



Why plant a black poplar?

Native Black Poplar is our rarest native timber tree found south of a line from the Humber to the Lune Estuary. Castlemorton Common is well known for the number of old pollard trees on the common and surrounding area. Most trees are elderly and will eventually need to be replaced. Planting a native black poplar will help keep these iconic trees as a feature of Castlemorton and nearby Parishes into the future.

About native black poplar

They are large trees and can grow up to 40 metres high and spread up to 20 metres. Young trees have smooth silvery grey bark which becomes darker and strongly fissured as they age. Older trees have branches that arch and curve downwards and trunks that have characteristic burrs and bumps on them. Male and female flowers are born on separate trees. Fewer than 10% of trees are female making them hard to find and a priority for conservation.

Choosing a site

Close to ditches, streams or ponds is ideal. But other sites that are in the floodplain are suitable where there is a high water-table. They don't like being shaded and are not a woodland tree. Planting in a managed hedge or a field corner can be a good choice.

They are fast growing and will become big trees, so think about how much space they need. Do not plant within 30-40 metres of a building as their roots can weaken foundations. Planting a mix of female and male trees is ideal as a conservation measure. But female trees can be unpopular especially near gardens because of the fluffy seeds that they produce.

Planting

You can grow black poplars as maiden trees or as pollards which are cut regularly at 2-3 metres above ground level. If planting several trees think about whether you intend them to be standards or pollards. Standards should be planted 20 metres apart but pollards can be spaced at 8-10 metres.

Options for planting are truncheons or rooted cuttings. Truncheons are 1.5 metre lengths of poplar cut from the tree and planted without any roots. Rooted cuttings will have been grown on from 15cm lengths of pencil thick twigs.

Truncheons should be planted by burying the bottom 50 cms below ground. On some damp soils you may be able to simply push the truncheon into the ground. Otherwise you can make a pilot hole with a crowbar or large screwdriver or failing that dig a hole. Firm the ground around the truncheon by heeling in. Planted this way a stake should not be needed.



Truncheon before, during and after planting

The foliage is eaten by livestock and young trees can be damaged by deer so you will need to protect the truncheon with a tree guard of some sort. This may be a spiral and cane if there is no livestock. But will need to be much more substantial where there are horses or other grazing animals.

If you are planting a rooted cutting then dig a hole that is big enough for the root ball and that enables the plant to be at the same level relative to the soil. A stake should not be necessary but protect the cutting with a spiral guard held in place with a cane. Once again a more substantial guard is needed if there is livestock present.

Aftercare

Newly established plants should be watered particularly over their first summer and possibly into their second year depending on conditions.

Truncheons shouldn't need a lot of weeding unless there is strong growth of robust plants such as nettles. Truncheons are inexpensive, quick and easy but have a fairly high failure rate – so be prepared for replacement plantings the next year for any losses. Truncheons should root from buds that have been buried below ground. It may be helpful to prune back some of the shoots in mid-summer if they are showing signs of wilting.

Rooted cuttings are smaller and will require more weeding but have a root system already formed so should be more drought tolerant.