

## **RAMORUM DISEASE discovered at EPPING FOREST – our actions to limit its spread**

This year, during the Conservators' annual tree health survey, a new disease which could seriously threaten Epping Forest trees, ramorum disease, was discovered at its very earliest stage in some rhododendron bushes. The outbreak has been found at The Warren Plantation in the north of the Forest near to the M25 and Waltham Abbey.

*Phytophthora ramorum*, which causes ramorum disease, is an algae-like organism that can spread through both spores and a network of thread-like rootlets in the soil. Spores generated on certain host shrubs and trees, especially larch and rhododendron, can carry the infection several miles from their source, blown by the wind, and in moist air currents. Spores can also be transported by people, animals and equipment. Getting in through the bark of a tree, they can kill many species of woody plants. Ramorum disease is called 'Sudden Oak Death' in North America. However, the name is misleading in the UK, where our two native species of oak have proved much less susceptible to the genetic strains of the organism already here. Therefore the name ramorum disease is now used.

Having killed millions of North American native oak and tan-oak trees, mostly in California, it was first found in the UK in 2002, on a garden plant in a nursery. Since then its discovery in larch trees in Cornwall in 2009 has led to the felling of millions of trees, mostly larches, and mostly on the western side of Great Britain as well as in Ireland and Northern Ireland, in order to minimise its spread and impact. Infected larch trees produce particularly high numbers of spores, so it is important to fell them as quickly as possible to minimise spread and protect neighbouring plants from infection.

So this new discovery at Epping Forest, which is home to over 85% of the UK's ancient native beech trees, is of special concern. Beech trees are particularly susceptible to ramorum disease, and if its spores were allowed to multiply and spread, it would have the potential to destroy this internationally significant population of trees, some of which may be over 1,000 years old.

Given this level of threat, The Conservators responded rapidly to their discovery of ramorum. Following advice from national agencies and in line with a Statutory Plant Health Notice, those rhododendron bushes confirmed with the disease in October were completely removed within a few weeks, and destroyed by burning on site. However, following further intensive survey, another single rhododendron at Warren Plantation was found with the

disease in December. This new diseased plant, although removed within days, reveals the continuing level of threat from this pathogen.

As Eleanor Laing MP for Epping Forest said:

*“I commend the Conservators of Epping Forest for acting immediately. It is clearly good news that the initial outbreak has been minimised by their actions, and I am very keen for the Conservators to continue to take the necessary measures to reduce the risk of this damaging disease spreading.”*

Now, working closely with guidance from the Animal & Plant Health Agency (APHA) and the Forestry Commission, a two-to-three year programme to remove the rhododendrons and larch trees from Epping Forest and its Buffer Lands is being undertaken. This work is aimed at safeguarding the future of the beech forest and contributing to the national strategy to contain the spread of the infection. In addition to the clearance of bushes and larch trees required at The Warren Plantation over the next few months, the programme of work will eventually include removal of rhododendron at Knighton Woods and Wanstead Park. Whilst these sites are at some distance from the outbreak site in the north of the Forest, they contain trees which are susceptible to the disease and which could spread it much further. Wanstead Park and nearby Bush Wood and George Green, contain important sweet chestnut plantings amongst which are the three-centuries'-old 'Repton' sweet chestnuts. As well as threatening these ancient trees, the spores can multiply rapidly in any Sweet Chestnut, old or young, and can then be spread very widely.

*“We are committed to minimising the spread and impact of ramorum disease and working with the City of London Corporation to monitor and protect the health of trees and plants in and around Epping Forest. The actions which it has taken, and plans to take, are in line with the national ramorum disease management strategy. The strategy’s emphasis on early destruction of infected and likely infected plants, before they can spread the disease further, has helped to significantly reduce the rate of new infection in recent years.”*

**Steve Scott, East England & East Midlands Director, Forestry Commission**

Whilst there are some locally notable ornamental rhododendron varieties and some historic plantings in Epping Forest, these are not unique specimens. However, the proposal is to collect cuttings of the scarcer varieties and send them to the Royal Horticultural Society Rhododendron, Camellia and Magnolia Group, which would conserve them and grow them on in locations where they can both thrive and be closely monitored for ramorum disease.

Ramorum disease infects plants only, and there is no risk to human or animal health. As Philip Woodhouse, Chairman of the City of London Corporation's Epping Forest Committee, said:

*"There is no public health risk and Epping Forest remains open to its many visitors. We are working closely with the national plant health and forestry agencies, in line with nationally recognised good practice. Those Rhododendron bushes which have been identified with the disease have already been removed and destroyed onsite."*

So, visitors do not have to be excluded from the Forest, but the public are asked to help minimise the spread of the disease by:

- Keeping to marked paths, Forest roads and hard footpaths *when and where directed*
- Not removing any plant material from the Forest, such as cuttings
- Removing soil and mud from boots and shoes before entering or leaving the Forest
- Keeping away from any felling operations and respecting any safety notices
- Never bringing plant material, soil or garden waste into the Forest

We understand that this will represent a significant change for some of the areas affected. However, ramorum disease poses such a clear and substantial threat to our ancient beech trees that we need to respond in the most effective manner to restrict the spread of the disease. We also have a responsibility to minimise the risk of this outbreak spreading to other parts of eastern England. The nature of the outbreak at Epping Forest indicates that it has come from introduced source material and not through natural dispersal. Along with the less visited and restricted location in which it has been found, these factors together provide good reasons to be optimistic about containment within this site at this stage.

Councillor Gary Waller – Safer, Greener and Transport Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Epping Forest District Council, responding to this news, said:

*"Firstly, the Corporation must be applauded in undertaking their duty to notify the Council of proposed tree works within the important Copped Hall Conservation Area. But perhaps more*

*importantly praise is in order for the exemplary diligence of their vigilant experts, who have been closely monitoring the host plants, in this case rhododendron and larch, throughout the Forest and in this plantation in particular.*

*“It is most regrettable that this disease has been discovered at close range to the Forest’s almost peerless population of ancient beech but the Council strongly supports the speedy and extensive works, that the City Corporation has already started, in eradicating the risk of this devastating pathogen.”*

We will need to ensure that the cleared sites remain clear for at least a 5-year period, as it is known that rhododendron re-growth can be re-infected from spores on the soil surface for up to 5 years after the shrubs are removed. Longer term we will be allowing natural regeneration of the areas with native plants such as oak, birch and bramble. To protect Epping Forest’s natural aspect and its status as a protected Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC) the Conservators’ management policy excludes planting within the main body of the Forest. When removing plants from sensitive and popular sites, such as Knighton Wood, Buckhurst Hill, we will take into account the visual impact of the clearance, and attention will be paid to the natural aspect, visitor access routes, views and vistas from pathways and general sight-lines.

Judy Adams, Friends of Epping Forest said:

*“The risk of this dreadful disease getting a hold in the Forest would be extremely serious, with the potential loss of thousands of beech and other trees. It is only in these circumstances that we feel able to support the Conservators removal of rhododendron and other alien host species.”*

We would encourage everybody to be vigilant and look for signs of this disease in the surrounding area. If the disease is suspected and symptoms found in the plant trade, such as nurseries and garden centres, or in garden plants, please report this immediately to the Animal & Plant Health Agency (APHA) on 01904 405138 or email:

[planthealth.info@apha.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:planthealth.info@apha.gsi.gov.uk). ([www.gov.uk/government/organisations/animal-and-plant-health-agency](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/animal-and-plant-health-agency))

If suspected symptoms are found in trees and woodland, please alert the Forestry Commission, preferably with its *Tree Alert* on-line disease reporting tool.

([www.forestry.gov.uk/treealert](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/treealert)). You will need to supply a clear, close-up, well-lit digital photograph of the symptoms with your *Tree Alert* report.

When its details are finalised the programme of rhododendron and larch clearance works will be made available here. This winter's work will be provided in detail while the longer-term programme will be given in outline. The programme covers more than one year and at least eight separate locations and, therefore, will be reviewed by the Conservators at their regular meetings. As these reviews are completed this web-site will be updated.

Detailed information about ramorum disease in the UK is available on the Forestry Commission's website at [www.forestry.gov.uk/pramorum](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pramorum).