

ASH *Fraxinus excelsior*

LATIN EXPLANATION. *fraks-in-us*; probably from Greek *phrasso*, to fence, the wood being useful for fence-making. *ek-sel-se-or*, taller.

HEIGHT - Ash can reach 45m in ideal conditions, but is more usually 25m (75ft). The tallest ash in the British Isles is 35m.

SOIL TYPE - Although it tolerates a pH as low as 4.5, ash grows best in well drained but moist, base-rich soils with a pH above 5.5. As a native it is confined to such areas and to soils over chalk and limestone; here, however, it does not grow well if the soil is thin, disliking dryness at the roots especially in late spring. It is surprisingly tolerant of seasonal waterlogging.

HABITAT - Ash is the most common tree in Northern Ireland, growing wherever the soil is suitable. In the wild, young seedlings show great sensitivity to heavy shade, failing to develop properly, or even dying. Given full light though, they will grow rapidly, rainfall in May and June being probably the vital factor. Ash is a widespread hedgerow tree, often as a coppiced plant.

SHAPE - A deciduous tree, usually with a long clean trunk and open canopy. Its most distinctive feature is its large winter buds, black and conical in shape. These help in identifying this species occurring at the ends of upturned branches, which often come close to the ground.

ASSOCIATED SPECIES - **Neutral soils** Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), crab apple (*Malus sylvestris*), guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*), hazel (*Corylus avellana*), pedunculate oak (*Quercus petraea*), purging buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*), downy birch (*Betula pubescens*) and wych elm (*Ulmus glabra*). **Calcareous soils** Bird cherry (*Prunus padus*), whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*), wych elm and yew (*Taxus baccata*).

DISTRIBUTION - Ash is found throughout the British Isles, extending to southern Europe. It is completely hardy in lowland areas and has the ability to grow in many coastal parts of Ireland.

FLOWERS & SEEDS - Female flowers are borne in compact clusters opening in April before the leaves. They are individually inconspicuous, but very noticeable in the large clusters they form, drooping from the sides of branches. Both pollination and seed dispersal are brought about by wind. The flowers may be male, female or of both sexes, with all types on the same tree. The female flowers develop into seeds that ripen into bunches of pale yellow-brown keys by September.

INTERESTING FACTS

- The ash is nearly always the last native tree to come into leaf in spring and the first to shed its leaves in autumn.
- 68 species of plant-eating insects are associated with ash. Over 200 species of epiphytic lichens have been recorded on it: only the oak has more.
- Three types of gall are common on ash, causing swellings and distortion of the foliage and flowers. Flower-galling, which can affect whole trees, is caused by the tiny gall mite, *Eriophyes fraxinivorus*.
- Ash wood is very strong and flexible: indeed, tests show ash to have greater toughness than any other home-grown hardwood.
- The ash has a preference for the northern and eastern sides of hills and loves moisture for its roots.
- Ash casts a light shadow and the leaves rot very quickly after leaf fall.
- It is very tolerant of cutting, producing long straight stems very rapidly after cutting.
- The wood, especially of fast growing specimens, is strong and resilient.
- The natural life span of ash is two hundred years.
- An extensive survey has recently found that Ash is one of the most efficient native trees for absorbing pollution created by traffic.



The distinctive winter bud and flowers of ash.



Ash 'keys' collected in October.

