



Ash had been the country's broadleaf of choice with 1.3 million planted each year in the decade between 1997 and 2007

Coillte Killers

How the State forestry authority hastened the end of Ireland's ash trees

By Tony Lowes

Ash arrived in Ireland at the end of the last Ice Age 12,000 years ago and is Ireland's most common, tallest native tree, and the most abundant tree in hedgerows.

In the autumn of 2012 a customer of Coillte Teo reported ash dieback disease [Chalara] in his three-year-old plantation in County Leitrim. It was the first manifestation of the lethal disease that will destroy the species. on this island.

The 5,000 saplings on the Leitrim site, and those on ten other sites, were part of a consignment of 31,000 germinated in the Netherlands from Coillte-supplied seed. Coillte's own nurseries were over-full of Sitka spruce. as the company continued to grow enough conifers to meet planting targets that were never reached.

A failure in phyto-sanitary procedures allowed the ash to return as young whips — slender young plants that don't yet have branches or offshoots — with the fungal pathogen, previously unknown in Ireland but spreading then throughout Europe.

Symptoms include foliage wilt and discoloration, crown dieback, and necrotic lesions and cancers along the bark.

According to Teagasc, the Government's Agricultural and Food Development Authority, "Ash dieback disease is likely to cause the death of the majority of the country's ash trees over the next two decades". 1% - 3% may have

natural immunity.

The trees on the 11 sites were subsequently destroyed under official supervision. In October 2012 Simon Coveney and Michelle O'Neill announced a cross-border 'Fortress Ireland' approach: eradication of every infected tree.

In 2013 The National Roads Authority suspended the use of ash in roadside plantings; Teagasc organised 22 information meetings to alert the public.

It was no use. 'Fortress Ireland' failed, as the disease, which can have a 20-kilometre airborne range, spread its devastation across Ireland.

By 2015 surveys led to findings of the disease more than 10 kilometres from the original site in Leitrim.

A 2020 survey found and confirmed the disease in 660 locations in all 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland.

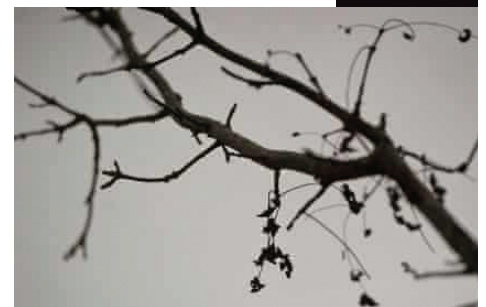
Worse, ash had been the country's broadleaf of choice with 1.3 million planted each year in the decade between 1997 to 2007; the IFA estimates that between 22,000 and 25,000 hectares have been planted around the country. But planted as monoculture rather than as mixed forestry, the trees were wide open to disease or pests.

There are between 4,000 and 5,000 forest owners with ash plantations that are dying or dead. The extent of the damage is only now really becoming visible in hedgerows, amenity planting, and commercial sites.

The 2013 Ash Dieback reconstitution scheme was suspended in 2018 when it was clear the original aim of the scheme — eradication — was



Dying back



not realistic. 1,600 hectares had been restored at a cost of €4.4 million. A revised scheme in 2020 - the Ash Dieback Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme - has brought the bill to €7 million with applications continuing to come in.

According to the Forest Owners' Co-op, this represents payments to a very small proportion of the landowners. And they say the grants are neither large enough nor long-term enough to replace what has been for the agricultural community the equivalent of the construction industries' mica scandal.

Coillte, with record revenues last year of €422 million, has never acknowledged its role, with the current Minister for Agriculture stating on May 2022 that "the exact origin of ash dieback disease in Ireland or when it was introduced are unknown". In an effort to meet the demand for 350,000 hurleys a year, Ireland's hurley-makers are now importing bamboo. 

Tony Lowes is a Director of Friends of the Irish Environment.