

What are the problems with doubling woodland cover in the Mendip Hills AONB?

#mendipwoodland

Wooded combes are one of Mendip's 'special qualities' and I think we all agree that trees are good. Friends of the Earth have a campaign to double tree cover across



the country and Greta Thunberg, in her recent video with George Monbiot, promote trees as the most obvious 'natural climate solution'.

All 34 AONBs across the country have signed up to increasing woodland cover. At the moment in the Mendip Hills 12% of the AONB is covered by woodland compared to 10% in England. Just under 2000ha is broadleaved and 400ha is conifer in Mendip.

At present woodland cover in all AONBs is 264,216ha, AONB partnerships have signed up to this being increased by 36,000ha by 2030. That's a 13% increase in woodland cover spread across all AONBs and for some areas would be easier to achieve than others.

It raises the question of where do we want those trees? Where is appropriate? We'd want the right tree in the right place. So, what are the right trees and where are the right places?

The Mendip Hills is broken down into Landscape Character Areas and we can see from this that combes and north facing slopes are where there's most at present. Increasing cover here will not have a serious effect on the landscape character. The south facing slopes are characterised by flower rich meadows and we wouldn't want to sacrifice those.

The right tree is slightly more difficult due to chalara (ash dieback) and climate change. Away from the plantations our woodlands on Mendip are mainly ash, some predictions show 70% of ash may die because of chalara. A recent study looked at the ['Ecological impacts of ash dieback and mitigation methods'](#) (Alice Broome and



Ruth J. Mitchell, July 2017). The report identifies the levels of association that ash trees have with six types of organism; birds, mammals, bryophytes, fungi, lichen and invertebrates. An amazing 955 of other species associated with ash trees.

Using the same methodology, the report shows that oak and beech are the next best for the number of associations with other organisms, 640 and 505 respectively.

We know the right places, the northern slopes and combes, we know the species, oak and beech, but how do we get landowners to come forward? There may be some philanthropic landowners that see the greater good and are willing to change agricultural land to woodland. Others may try a mix of agro-forestry, the UK's largest site doing this mix is just to the south of Peterborough, where the farmer has 125 acres of organic oats with strips of apple trees across; reducing wind erosion of the soil, increasing water retention and improving biodiversity – eg. most bird species have increased by 20-50% with barn owls up 400%. (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/feb/16/agro-forestry-as-a-huge-opportunity-for-uk>)

Local authority land will be an easy win and Section 106, or planning gain money, could also be targeted at paying for tree planting. [The Woodland Trust](#) still offer free trees to certain groups and we're looking at putting a proportion of the [Mendip Hills Fund](#) money aside just for tree planting.

What do you think, how could we encourage landowners to plant more trees? And what about you? Could you plant one or more trees in your garden?