

# Ash trees in Battersea Park

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The Ash is a member of the same botanical family as olive, lilac, jasmine and forsythia.

In Battersea Park, we have a number of different kinds of ash. Most of the trees are Common Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*). The black buds on these trees open into clustered flowers with prominent mauve stamens which appear before the long compound leaves with 7-13 coarsely serrated leaflets (Fig.1). The leaves on the Common Ash trees in the Park open at different times, and in particular the leaves on the Weeping Ashes can be very late. As with the other species of ash, Common Ash are dioecious, that is to say the male and female reproductive organs are usually on separate trees but, curiously, Ashes may change flower sex from year to year.

There are two variant forms of Common Ash trees in the Park. Seven of the trees are the weeping form, which is produced by grafting weeping branches onto the trunk of a Common Ash tree. It is believed that this grafting was first done in Cambridgeshire in the middle of the 18th century.

The position of the graft can be clearly seen on some of our trees at a height of 2 or 3 metres, but in one case in 1848, at Elvaston Castle in Derbyshire, a graft was inserted at the remarkable height of 27 metres. Often the tree does not rise much above the point of grafting. There is a high graft on the Weeping Ash on the west side of the Subtropical Garden, and this is the fourth tallest Weeping Ash in England recorded by the Tree Register. In September 2022, bees were seen nesting in a hole in the trunk of this tree at a height of around 6 metres. The Weeping Ash on the grass beside East Carriage Drive (south-east of the Pear Tree Café) has the widest girth

recorded in Central London (Fig.2) but this tree is not in good shape – it has a hole at the foot of the trunk and there is bracket fungus.

In the other variant, var. *diversifolia*, only (in most cases) an undivided leaf develops. There is an example at the east end of the wooden bridge (Fig.3). This confusing form is recognisable as Ash when the winged seeds have formed.

The flowers on most of the ash species in the Park have no petals. An exception is the dense white panicles on the Manna Ash (*Fraxinus ornus*) (Fig.4). The largest of the Park's Manna Ash trees is close to the Beechmore Road gate and has a particularly fine shape; the graft at the foot of this tree is clearly visible. There are younger examples beside the east end of the lake path in the south of the Park, at the west end of the Winter Garden and in the Queenstown Road border. They flower in May. Originally from Southern Europe, this species has naturalised in the Cheviots and in Cambridgeshire, as well as being extensively planted. The name arises from allegedly medicinal sugary sap which can be obtained from a cut in the bark, but please don't try this in the Park.

The flowers on female ash trees develop into 'ash keys' (winged seeds) which hang down from the tree in bunches for much of the winter (Fig. 5).

The Park has a number of Narrow-leaved Ashes (*Fraxinus angustifolia*). There is a fine example in the Subtropical Garden. The tree on the corner north of the Thrive Garden is the *lentiscifolia* variety, with bigger leaflets which spread outwards rather than pointing forwards. The tree beside the road near Chelsea Gate is the tallest Weeping Narrow-leaved

Ash recorded in Greater London by the Tree Register. A smaller weeping tree is beside the Pump House.

The 'Raywood' variety of the Narrow-leaved Ash, Claret Ash, is noted for the colour of its leaves. In November (Fig.6), but some trees show better autumn colour than others, and the autumn leaf colour can vary from year to year. There are examples at the east end of the Rosery car park, between the river and the Zoo, and beside Albert Bridge Road south of the Sun Gate. This variety was introduced in about 1925 from Australia, where introduced Ash has become an invasive 'weed'. The leaves of European Ash species, on the other hand, are still pale green when they fall in autumn.

North of the athletics track is an Oregon Ash (*Fraxinus latifolia*). Beside the Friends' Lime tree in the east of the Park is what may be a White Ash (*Fraxinus americana*) which also has fine leaf colour in October (Fig.7).

Common Ash trees across the country are in serious danger from ash die-back disease, which is a fungus that causes leaves to discolour and cankers where branches meet the trunk. Eventually the tree dies. The disease was first recorded in the UK in 2012 from imported nursery trees, and many trees have already been lost, with most impact in the south-east. It is feared that 80% of our country's ash trees will be lost. It has destroyed populations on the continent and in turn threatens many species which rely on Ash. Weeping ash trees are particularly vulnerable to the disease. No cases have yet been identified in Battersea Park, but the risk is increasing and trees are routinely inspected.

The timber of Common Ash is hard and hard-wearing. It has traditionally

been used for making chair frames, bows, tool handles (such as hammers and axes), tennis rackets and snooker cue sticks. The book *The Man who made Things out of Trees* by Robert Penn, describes how the author chose an ash tree in a wood, and then set about himself making many different things from it using traditional techniques.

To discuss ash trees, or other trees and shrubs in Battersea Park, contact [batterseaparktreetwatchers@btinternet.com](mailto:batterseaparktreetwatchers@btinternet.com)



**Fig 1.** Common Ash male flowers and a leaf. The leaf is compound and pinnate, i.e. has 6 leaflets ('pinnae') either side of the stalk and a terminal leaflet.



**Fig 2.** Weeping Ash. Note wide girth of the trunk below the grafted branches.



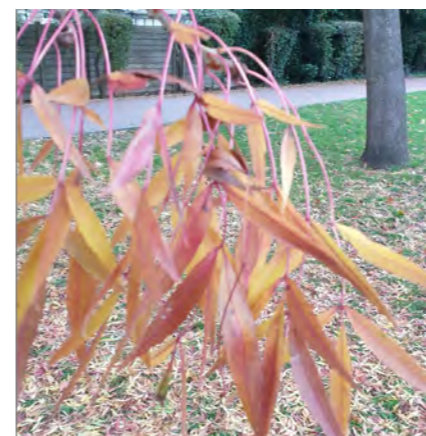
**Fig 3.** Common Ash *diversifolia* variety ('One leaved Ash'). This type with its single large leaves is confusing to identify until the winged seeds ('keys') have formed (centre of picture).



**Fig 4.** Manna Ash flowers open after the leaves. There are 4 white narrow petals to each flower. Some yellow stamens can be seen at the right edge of the cluster.



**Fig 5.** Common Ash winged seeds ('keys'). There is a single wing to each key. They stay on the tree all winter until March winds.



**Fig 6.** Narrow-leaved Ash are originally from Southern Europe but the Raywood variety arose amongst introduced Ash trees in Australia. It is grown for its autumn tints.



**Fig 7.** We think this is White Ash though the species is quite scarce in UK. When the leaves are green the leaf undersides are silvery white, and the buds are brown. Shown here in autumn tints.