

Veteran Tree Management Guide

Durham Biodiversity Partnership

**Veteran
Trees
Project**



4 How to manage your Veteran Tree

Please note that this publication is not encouraging you to try and manage your own trees. Doing so is extremely dangerous and should only be performed by highly skilled professionals. If you believe that your tree requires some sort of management, please contact your local authority or the Arboricultural Association directly to determine the next step. This section simply gives background information on how trees can be actively managed in a positive way.

If a veteran tree is located next to a footpath and there is a perceived risk of the tree falling, the best course of action would be to move the footpath to an alternative location. If this is not possible, then selective cutting could be undertaken.

If a veteran tree is located next to a road or waterway, only overhanging material should be seen as risky as it is very unlikely that the tree will fall (unless damaged).



A veteran Beech that has had branches removed

© John Durkin



A fenced veteran Rowan
© John Durkin

This will also cause the other side of the tree to be heavier, so if the tree were to fall, it would fall away from the road or waterway. If material needs to be removed it should be left at the base of the tree, thus it can then continue to provide dead wood habitat and the nutrients from the tree will return to the soil as it rots away.

If a veteran tree has been vandalised, grazed or has its roots compacted around its base, a fence should be placed around the tree as far as the extent of the leaves in the height of summer. This would protect the tree from both animal and human interference. This could also be considered if there is a footpath nearby.

If you are concerned about a veteran tree that is exposed to high winds, the best course of action is to undertake no management at present, but carry out regular checks on the state of the tree. Trees very rarely fall over from high winds alone and should only need to be managed if they are affected by other factors or if the tree is found on a steep slope. If this is the case, then selective cutting should be undertaken.

If a veteran tree has roots that could damage road surfaces or buildings, the best solution would be to repair the building as and when it happens. It is unlikely that tree roots would cause irreparable damage to buildings or roads, and it would be a minor cost, more than outweighing the price of damaging the tree.

Unfortunately, if a veteran tree can be seen to have the early stages of an infection from a life-threatening fungus such as honey fungus that could cause other trees to become infected through the soils and collapse, felling may be the only realistic option. Simply removing the fruiting body will have very little effect as the actual decay could be occurring deep within the roots, which can't be removed without the tree

being killed. A consultant should be contacted to determine whether or not the tree can be saved. The majority of the tree should be allowed to stand if possible, even if it is dead, to ensure that the habitat is retained.

In a situation where a tree could potentially damage a building, or if large branches are overhanging a footpath, carriageway or waterway, removing the crown (in whole or part) may be the best solution. This process is also known as “dropping”.

The best thing to do for older, more mature trees is ‘gradual reduction’, which is removing smaller portions of the top of the tree at intervals of 5 years or so to ensure that the tree can adapt to its new growth patterns. All branches cut off should be left at the base of the tree.

Veteran trees are commonly found as part of a hedgerow or field boundary around cultivated arable land. In this case, the best way to protect the tree from damage would be to leave a grassland margin around the tree to at least the extent of the land directly underneath the canopy. This will protect the roots from damage that cultivation may cause. Alternatively, fencing off the land underneath the spread of the canopy can be



Ganoderma (bracket fungi)
© North East Wildlife



Armillaria (Honey Fungus)
© David Humphreys

much better protection and also be useful in preventing accidental damage from other activities. Fencing off a tree, or creating a grassland margin around it is the sole responsibility of the landowner, so it would not be necessary to contact the Arboricultural Association on this occasion.

Some veteran trees can be found on land that has been planted up with other trees, such as a timber plantation. In these cases, the younger trees can compete with the veteran for both sunlight and soil-based nutrients. In some cases the competition can lead to the death of the veteran. This situation calls

for the removal of the younger trees, and is known as “halo thinning”. The removal of competition (particularly of trees of a different species) gives the veteran the best chance of staying alive and retaining its habitat.

On rare occasions, mature trees can be harvested for timber. The removal of timber from a tree can continue indefinitely, as long as the re-pollarding is staggered and all new growth isn't removed at the same time. A 10-20 year cycle would be appropriate for most situations, but with timber production, this would depend on the species. New growth can be more fragile and susceptible to wind damage, so careful consideration must be undertaken before deciding to cyclically remove material from a veteran tree. When removing material from a tree, it needs to be understood that this is also taking nutrients from the soil. Mulch or compost (not manure) at the base of the tree should compensate for the removal of nutrients. Please note that this technique is incredibly complicated and should only be performed and monitored by very highly skilled professionals. Please contact the Arboricultural Association or your local authority if you would like to consider this option.



An ash tree from the Cotswolds that was managed as a pollard
© Ted Green



Pollarded Sycamore
© John Durkin