

Hello Trees Resource Sheet

What to look for outdoors in March

Yew flowers: smoke without fire



My friend Margaret saw smoke billowing round her garden. She called for help and went anxiously looking for the fire.

There was no fire, only a dense cloud of fine yellow pollen wafting out of her yew tree.



You can find those flowers and make them release their smoke if you can find an old churchyard. There are always yew trees to be found in old churchyards. There are two kinds of yew trees:

- Irish yews and
- English yews

One has floppy outward stretching branches, and leaves that lie flat on either side of the shoot.



The other has curly leaves that come out of the shoot in every direction, and branches that curve tightly upwards.



Which do you think is which?



Clue: Irish yews are used for topiary, they can be clipped into dense ornamental shapes.



Yes, it is the Irish yew that has curly leaves that come out of the shoot in every direction, and branches that curve tightly upwards, all of which characteristics make it good for topiary.



Topiary is the art of clipping a tree into a shape.



See how many different shapes you can see in images of yew topiary on the Internet.



Now that you have found your yew tree, look for tiny round yellow blobs. These are the male flowers covered in pollen.



To make them release their 'smoke' flick them with your finger and see the cloud of pollen that even a small sprig will release.




male yew flowers


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 What are the consequences to the tree, do you think, of you sending its pollen out into the air?

We need first to think about where that pollen must get to in order for seeds to form.

 Can you see what might be the seed-forming flowers - female flowers - on the same tree?

No, there aren't any other flowers on this tree.

 We have to look for another yew tree - a female yew tree - that has the kind of flower that could form a seed if pollen falls on it.


Male and female yew trees have the same shape and leaves as each other.


You will almost always find both male and female yew trees planted near each other.




Male and female yew trees planted alongside each other

However, I don't think you will find it easy to find female flowers unless you know where to look and what to look for.

 They are tiny, pale green and hidden on the underside of leaves.

 I wonder why they are underneath the leaves. Surely it makes it difficult for pollen to fall on them.

 I truly don't know what the advantage to the tree this could be. Let us know if you have any thoughts on the subject.



Female yew flowers

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Let's go back to the question of whether our flicking pollen is a disadvantage to the tree.

- Could it depend on whether it is windy or still?
- Could it depend on whether the pollen is ripe and whether the female flowers are ready to receive the pollen?
- Could it depend on how scarce or plentiful the pollen is?
- Any other factors?



I suggest:

- pollen would have a better chance of reaching the female flowers on a windy day;
- that pollen wouldn't fly off in clouds if it were not ripe;
- It doesn't matter whether we flick the pollen or the wind takes it, because the readiness of the female flowers will be the same;
- there is absolutely masses of pollen so that a bit lost to the air is no problem;
- and, anyway, would it matter if fewer seeds were formed?



We shall think about yew seeds and fruits later in the year.

Outdoor discovery
is a walk in the park
with "Hello Trees"
books