

The great Native/Non-Native debate

I read recently an article by the Natural History Museum, which stated that over half of the plants now growing in the UK are non-native. It would seem that we have in the region of 3,500 native plant species and most are in decline, though many of the non-native (figure greater than 3,500 species) are establishing themselves, naturalising in areas and some are becoming destructively invasive.

On reflection, I am actually quite surprised that we have only a little more than 3,500 non-native species in the UK, as we have been easily the most prolific importer of non-native plant species in the world for centuries. We may bemoan our climate, but it is largely temperate; in most years not too hot and not too cold, suiting a huge number of plants from the Americas, Europe, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and temperate Asia. The great plant hunters are well-known, and well thought of, but conceivably their reputation may end up tarnished by the impact on native plants from some of their finds.

Australia and New Zealand know about the risks that non-native species present with the cane toad, being so well recognised a threat in Australia that it even appears in an episode of the Simpsons! The same is true of plants we take for granted like the seemingly harmless shrub *Berberis thunbergii* (Japanese barberry) (in Australia), or our native *Cytisus scoparius* (Scotch broom) (in New Zealand) both of which are banned from sale in the respective countries due to their invasive nature and more specifically their propensity for colonising land choking out natives.

You could argue that the end of that sentence broadly describes colonialism by humans as well, which is what created the wealth and access required in the first place for the UK to become the plant hunting source point for the world. It enabled the benefactors and collectors who funded these projects as the agents through which the non-native plant and animal problems typically spread back home in the UK. A good example would be Wallaby escaping and naturalising in several parts of the UK from stately homes. In terms

of plants, the sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) is a good example, being either (nobody knows for sure) brought to the UK by the Romans, or later as a timber tree quicker growing than oak, following large scale deforestation to build armadas of ships. The sycamore is an extremely common large tree in the UK, and while it isn't in any way native, it is now as good as endemic to the UK as it has done so well over the last 500+ years.

Like New Zealand and Australia, we have an advantage over many nations, in that, as an island, we can limit spread of new pests, diseases and invasive plants. We actually have pretty good biosecurity in place in our ports and at nurseries through the APHA (Animal and Plant Health Agency), SASA (Scottish Agricultural Science Agency) in Scotland, who act on behalf of Defra (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs). Many problems like the nightmare of *Xylella* have so far been prevented from coming into the UK. In southern Europe thousands of acres of olive trees (*Olea europea*) have been culled first as they were dying from *Xylella* and now to create buffer zones to limit the spread of the thrips that spread it.

Our issue arises in that we have not had focus on what we were allowing to be imported for decades, if not centuries before Defra, SASA and APHA were even thought of and historically, we have not culled problems before they became too vast and widespread to control. I would suggest that even we passionate plant people, who are drawn to plants from Oceania need to consider the impact we have on local wild flora. We have all seen a hebe seeding itself into an area of wild landscape.

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