

FACT SHEET 7

Woodlands



All woodlands are valuable for wildlife, but those which are ancient (continuously wooded at least since 1600) are far richer in wildlife species. Many of these are very vulnerable; plants such as bluebell and wood anemone and creatures such as the dormouse and pearl bordered fritillary butterfly are unable to colonise new woods easily or move over large areas of unsuitable habitat.

Approximately 7% of the British countryside is covered by woodland, mostly in small fragmented blocks. In Gloucestershire around 11% is wooded, from the steep beech woods of the Cotswold scarp to the extensive Forest of Dean and Wye valley woodlands.

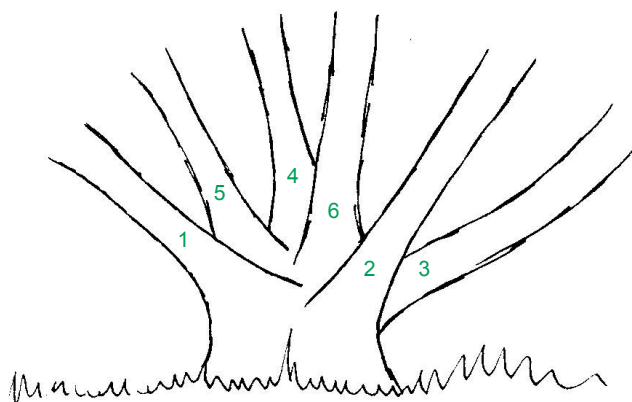
The subject of woodlands and their management is vast and you should always seek professional help from a qualified ecologist, woodland or countryside manager before embarking on a woodland project.

EXISTING WOODS

Woodlands vary greatly in their age, species of trees present and management. Woodlands which are best for wildlife are usually managed differently than those which are managed for commercial forestry. Wildlife-rich

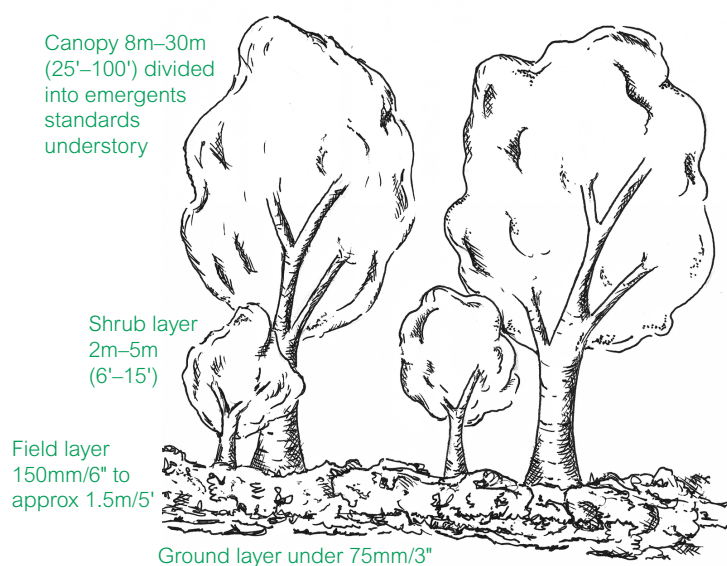
woodlands have a varied structure of trees; some tall trees (called standards) and an understorey (shrubs and shorter trees). The woodland floor will contain different types of flora and there will be some open areas or glades where there are no trees at all. This diversity of tree heights and the associated light and shady areas provide many different habitats for wildlife. In order to keep woodlands in this way, they must be managed. Leaving a woodland to “go wild” can decrease the diversity and some species will be lost.

Management of woodlands is a specialist job and expert advice should be sought when taking on a woodland. Management tasks such as thinning the standards can involve large trees and only qualified people should undertake this work.



Some woodlands are managed as ‘coppice’ (illustrate), where shorter trees and shrubs are cut to ground level and then allowed to re-grow in a cycle of 7–18 years. This admits sunlight to the woodland floor, stimulating the growth of wildflowers such as bluebells and violets, and provides dense cover for songbirds and species such as dormice.

Coppicing is a woodland management task which can be undertaken using hand tools by people with little experience, if the coppice is quite small. Coppice woodlands which have been left for many years unmanaged can be very difficult to work and once again should be left to professionals.



Older trees within a woodland are also very important, and should be identified and retained to provide valuable veteran tree habitat. The species that live on and within veteran trees are unique, and include nationally rare and scarce insects as well as a wide range of fungi. Many of these species are restricted to this type of habitat and have limited or no means of dispersal.

Finally dead trees, particularly standing dead trees should remain in situ if at all possible. They are particularly useful for nesting birds, fungi, bats and insects. If they have to be felled for safety reasons then they should be left intact on the ground where they will still provide valuable habitat. Branches and brushwood from coppicing should also be stacked to provide additional habitat.

Within the woodland there are likely to be paths, these can also be managed in a way which will benefit wildlife, a wide grassy (sometimes called a 'ride') path provides good habitat for butterflies especially if it gets some sunlight. Also sunny open glades should be encouraged and in small woodlands these may be created where two or more paths meet. They should be large enough that sunlight warms the ground and insects such as butterflies can thrive. They need to be kept open by cutting, probably once a year, in the autumn.

Wider rides and larger glades can be cut in more complex ways, for example cutting alternate sides in short lengths to create 'bays' along the length of the ride. This provides sheltered 'micro-climates' for insects, and means that you are not removing all the habitat in one go.

CREATING A NEW WOODLAND

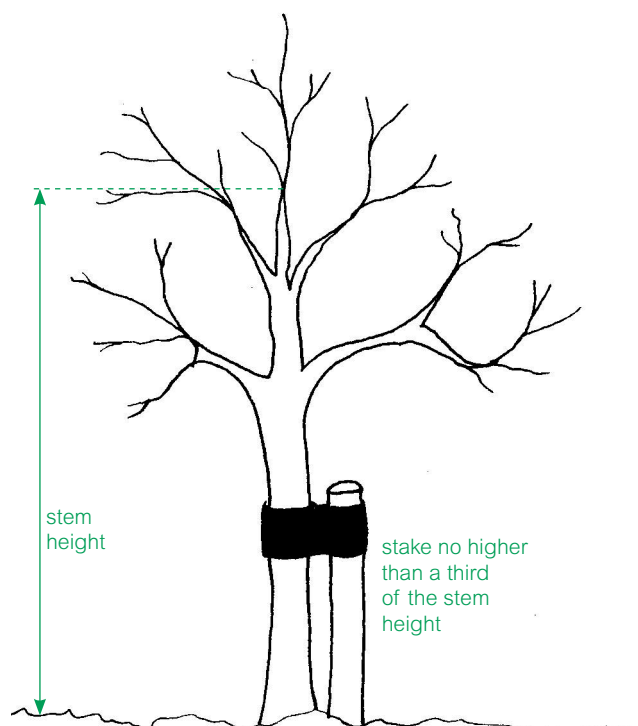
It is possible to create new woodlands in areas from school grounds to parks or farmland. However, you should always check that you are not destroying an already valuable wildlife habitat such as a wildflower meadow. It is preferable to plant near to an existing wood or between two areas of woodland so that they can be 'joined up' creating a larger more valuable area, however this is not essential to your success.

New woods should be planted to reflect the local area, so make sure that you are choosing species which are found locally and always try to source local stock. If yours is a community project then you could collect seed from existing nearby woods and grow the trees yourselves.

Before you start, make sure that the following has been considered:

- Check where services such as underground pipes and cables, and over head power lines are. Make sure you avoid these areas.
- Avoid planting in areas where the trees will overshadow houses or gardens, or where wide rooting trees could cause problems in the future.

Choose different species which will give you varied structure, some tall canopy trees, some under-storey trees and shrubs and some wildflowers for the woodland floor. When you are planting make sure there is enough room around the trees, 2–3 metres for the taller varieties, 1–2 metres for the shrubs. Plant those species which like lots of light around the edges or where paths and glades are going to be, and those which like shade nearer the middle. Always remember to protect the trees from rabbit and deer browsing by using tree guards or spirals and stake the trees to protect them from strong winds.



Here are some suggested species, but expert help will ensure that you get the right species for your site:

Tall trees

OAK
ASH
BEECH
WILD CHERRY

Shrubs – light loving

DOG ROSE
BLACKTHORN
GUELDER ROSE
FIELD MAPLE

Shrubs – shade tolerant

HAZEL
HOLLY
HAWTHORN

Woodland flowers

BLUEBELL
WOOD ANEMONE
DOG'S MERCURY
LESSER CELANDINE

There is often financial help available for managing existing woodlands and for creating new woodlands. Visit www.forestry.gov.uk for more details.

FURTHER READING

Woodlands, a practical handbook, Alan Brooks, BTCV, 1988, ISBN 0950164372.
Rediscovering Woodlands Toolkit, downloadable from the Small Woods Association; www.smallwoods.org.uk
Caring for Small Woods, Ken Broad, Earthscan, 1998, ISBN 1853834548



LOTTERY FUNDED

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