

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

Recording all plants growing wild in Somerset, not just the rarities



Meeting Report

Saturday 16th March 2024, Fyne Court (VC5)

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Report: Helena Crouch and Steve Parker

The second SRPG winter field workshop of the year attracted over twenty members of the group. Fyne Court is a property in the Quantock Hills owned and managed by the National Trust. We selected this site, a wild garden with a fair selection of conifers and broad-leaved trees, to continue our study of trees in winter, with a focus on conifers.

After a brief safety talk, as the site was very muddy with some ponds and watercourses, our first tree was a large specimen of Cherry Plum (*Prunus cerasifera*) on the edge of the car park. The tree was still in bloom: the large flowers with reflexed sepals and green twigs are distinctive features of this early flowering shrub.



Reflexed sepals of Cherry Plum © Sarah Shuttleworth

Next, we inspected a Yew (*Taxus baccata*) and keyed it out using the Vegetative Key. Leaves were clearly

single along the twig, each arising from an oblique projection. Leaves of Yew are also **discolorous**, the upper and lower surfaces are clearly different colours, and the midrib is raised on both sides.

Beside the path from the car park, specimens of Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*) and Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*) were compared. Both have opposite buds, but Spindle has green twigs whereas Dogwood twigs are green and red. A row of mighty Sycamores (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) presented another opportunity to revise winter twigs, as did a magnificent old Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*). Sycamore has fat green buds, with opposite lateral buds; Beech has long pointed reddish-brown buds and the lateral buds are alternate.

Reaching a small group of non-native conifers, we took these through the Vegetative Key. Leaves were **imbricate**, overlapping like roof tiles, and **opposite decussate**, in opposite pairs with each pair at right angles to the next. The branchlets were flat and the apex of each flat facial leaf did not overlap the next facial leaf. Each leaf had an oval resin gland and, after much discussion, we mostly agreed that the leaves smelled of parsley!



Opposite decussate imbricate leaves of Lawson's Cypress, with each flat facial leaf separated from the next facial leaf by the paired bases of the lateral leaves © Sarah Shuttleworth

This, and the small round cones, indicated that the trees were planted specimens of Lawson's Cypress (*Cupressus lawsoniana*). Close by was a sapling, suggesting that the trees had produced viable seed.

Leaving the garden and walking along the edge of the parkland, we spotted a row of alders with very large cones. The hairless twigs and green globose buds helped us identify these as Italian Alder (*Alnus cordata*). We also admired a veteran Sweet Chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) before walking to the largest conifer on the site, a Wellingtonia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*). The small scale-like leaves of this species were imbricate but arranged spirally around the branchlet. Cones were examined and it was noticed that the branches were downcurved, which apparently makes it a difficult tree to climb. Wellingtonia, or Giant Redwood, was introduced to Britain in 1853 by William Lobb.

Back in the Fyne Court garden, we discovered a large Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) has recently been felled, probably due to being blown over in the winter storm. This gave us the opportunity to inspect both the leaves and the cones up close. Leaves of cedars are arranged in dense clusters on short woody spurs; Cedar of Lebanon has green leaves (needles) which are almost 3cm long. The barrel-shaped cones gradually disintegrate on the tree.



Cone and clusters of leaves of Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*)
© Karen Andrews

Next to the Cedar was a fine example of Monterey Pine (*Pinus radiata*). This tree has very long needles in bunches of three and old cones which remain attached to the branches, a character that was obvious on this specimen.

After lunch at the National Trust café, we explored other parts of the gardens, admiring large old shrubs of Box (*Buxus sempervirens*) in flower. The next group of conifers proved very difficult to identify, as we were unable to reach the foliage and could not find cones on the ground, so could only study fallen branchlets. Leaves were single, 4-angled needles, **concolorous** (all one colour), less than 3cm long. The twigs were orange-brown, but seemed to be sparsely hairy, which meant that they failed to key neatly to Norway Spruce (*Picea abies*) which is what we were sure they were!

We moved on to a large specimen of Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) with its characteristic fissured bark, soft needles and slender pointed buds, almost like little Beech buds. This tree had also shed many cones making identification very easy as the cones have distinctive three-pronged bracts protruding from between the scales.

Our final conifer, by the estate buildings, was Western Red-cedar (*Thuja plicata*) with abundant flask-shaped cones. Like Lawson's Cypress, branchlets are flattened and leaves are imbricate and opposite decussate, however in *Thuja* the apex of each acutely **cuspidate** (sharply pointed) facial leaf just overlaps the next facial leaf. The foliage has a distinctive pineapple scent.



Opposite decussate imbricate leaves of Western Red-cedar, with each flat cuspidate facial leaf just overlapping the next facial leaf. Photo taken in Paulton Cemetery © Helena Crouch

The meeting ended with a well-deserved afternoon tea in the courtyard outside the café.