

## Yews in Fiction and Fact

Of vast circumference and gloom profound  
This solitary Tree! a living thing  
Produced too slowly ever to decay;  
Of form and aspect too magnificent  
To be destroyed.

Wordsworth

Yew trees first caught the photographer's attention during a summer auto tour of England and Wales.\* He was particularly drawn to them when he arrived in the small town of Painswick in Gloucestershire. As one drives into the center of the village, one sees that it is dominated by its churchyard. The church — a beautiful, old stone edifice dedicated to St. Mary the Virgin — is surrounded by some ninety yew trees, each meticulously trimmed and manicured into free-standing forms, shaping paths and walks throughout the yard.

The characteristic deep green, dense foliage of the trees contrasts with the grays of the church and gravestones to create a mood that borders between enchanting and haunting. According to tradition, the Painswick yews are clipped faithfully, on September 8, during the feast of the nativity of Our Lady. On the following Sunday — known locally as “clipping Sunday” — the parishioners march in procession around the churchyard and join hands, forming a ring around the church. Following that, they gather at the foot of a flight of steps leading to a tower door from which a sermon is preached.

*Yews in History and Literature.* It is difficult to think of the English countryside without conjuring up some images of old churchyards, resplendent with *Taxus baccata*. The trees are so abundant in certain areas that they are called the “Hampshire weed.” According to some references, the yews are even older than the churchyards themselves and may be the only surviving vestiges of medieval times.

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The association of the churchyard yew with the emblem of immortality most probably came into Christian tradition from pagan Britain. The yew is believed to have been but one of many pre-Christian symbols of nature that influenced later religious beliefs. It is easy to understand why the yew was selected for such meaning when one considers that it was, in early times, one of the only evergreen trees in England and Wales. Therefore, its foliage was not only decorative but "everlasting." The yew was probably planted on religious sites and was a survival of pre-Christian tree worshippers. It is perhaps remarkable that it survived the transition from pre-Christian to Christian times, since Christian councils of the sixth and seventh centuries restricted the veneration of trees.

In a short and interesting book titled *The Churchyard Yews and Immortality*, V. Cornish tells of his efforts to arrange the records of distribution and ages of yews found in Great Britain and, to a limited extent, on the Continent. In so doing, Cornish discovered that the distribution of these trees has been partly determined by the soil and rainfall available. In Wales, a country of heavy rainfall, the yews were abundant. Cornish estimates the age of some of these trees as about 900 years. He also recorded local legends which assigned to yews ages of somewhere between one and two thousand years. The traditions are repudiated by certain botanical experts who report that there



is no proof that any trees now in existence date back to Druidical times.

Although historians do not always agree on the origins of the use of yews in association with religion, it is generally accepted that the early Roman invaders of Britain used the yew in their funeral rites in place of the usual cypress and pine. Like the cypress, the yew was considered as a symbol of the resurrection and of immortality. Yew branches were used to line graves and to blanket caskets. Yew branches were also worn in hats and in buttonholes by mourners.

It is also fairly certain that the yew was used by some in place of palms for Palm Sunday celebrations. In the English churchyards of Kent, and in parts of Ireland, yew trees are referred to as palms because of their use in the palm services.<sup>1</sup> The yew was also used in church decoration along with the male catkins of *Salix caprea*, the goat willow.<sup>2</sup>

The very fact that yews are so often found in churchyards and graveyards has given rise to numerous superstitions about them. In Dallimore's book, *Holly, Yew & Box*, he quotes, from R. Turner, one of the more interesting of these stories:

<sup>1</sup> Ernest H. Wilson, "The Romance of Our Trees, IV. The Yew," *The Garden Magazine* 30: 213-217 (January 1920).

<sup>2</sup> W. Dallimore, *Holly, Yew & Box*, London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1908.



Fig. 5: *T. baccata* in the Painswick, Gloucestershire churchyard, where there are some ninety specimens. Photo: © Mark Silber.

...if the Yew be set in a place subject to poysonous vapours, the very branches will draw and imbibe them, hence it is conceived that the judicious in former times planted it in churchyards on the west side, because those places, being fuller of putrefaction and gross oleaginous vapours exhaled out of the graves by the setting sun, and sometimes drawn by those meteors called *ignes fatui*, divers have been frightened, supposing some dead bodies to walk, etc.

It was undoubtedly this very superstition that moved Lord Tennyson to write in his poem "In Memoriam" the following lines:

Old Yew, which graspest at the stones  
That name the underlying dead,  
Thy fibres net the dreamless head,  
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.

In his book Dallimore cited numerous writers and passages from literature that show the association of yews with death and immortality. These writers include Dryden, Virgil, Pliny, John Fletcher, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Dyer, and Sir Walter Scott.

Dallimore also suggests that the poisonous nature of the foliage has probably caused some of the undesirable associations to be made with yews. The toxic qualities were exaggerated in writings to the extent that there are authors who claimed that anyone who lay down to sleep beneath a yew would die. Such would also be the fate of those who were so cursed as to dream of the yew tree.

While yews have had their longstanding association with things religious and superstitious, they have also long been associated with matters more specifically utilitarian. For centuries the wood of these trees has been coveted for the purpose of making archers' bows. It was used for the crossbows and long bows that warriors bore in the battles of Cressy and Poitiers. And it is still used in the sportman's bow.

An interesting few lines from "The Song of the Bow," by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, read:

The bow was made in England,  
Of true wood, of yew wood,  
The wood of English bows.

*Taxus baccata* and Other Species. The genus *Taxus*, to which the commonly cultivated yews belong, consists of some eight

species of evergreen, needle-leaved shrubs or trees. The species are native to forest areas scattered over the North Temperate Zone. Of the eight species, only two and the hybrid between them are commonly cultivated in North America. Three more may be found in the collections of specialists or in botanical gardens. The differences listed in the books between the species do not seem to be very great. It must be admitted that some botanists, in the past, have considered them all to be merely varieties of a single species. However, the technical differences, combined with the differences of habit and habitat, do seem to be sufficient justification for keeping the entities separate. The five species that may be met with in cultivation may be distinguished as follows:

Leaves gradually pointed; scales of the winter buds obtuse, without a keel, persistent at the base of the branchlets; mature branchlets greenish (Zone VI, except one var. to Zone V) *T. baccata*

Leaves abruptly pointed; scales of the winter buds obtuse or pointed, keeled or not, not persistent at the base of the branchlets  
Scales of the winter buds not abruptly pointed, not keeled; leaves 2–4 cm. long, mature branchlets yellowish green (Zone V) *T. chinensis*

Scales of the winter buds abruptly pointed, keeled

Leaves with a broad, prominent midrib, 2–3 mm. broad, 1.5–2.5 cm. long; mature branchlets reddish brown (Zone IV) *T. cuspidata*

Leaves with only a slightly raised midrib, 1.5–2 mm. broad

Plant generally a low, frequently straggling, shrub; leaves 1.3–2 cm. long; seed broader than long; mature branchlets green (Zone II) *T. canadensis*

Plant a tree; leaves 1–2 cm. long; seed longer than broad; mature branchlets yellowish green (Zone VI) *T. brevifolia*

*Taxus* × *media* Rehder (*T. cuspidata* × *T. baccata*) is a hybrid that is commonly met with in the nursery trade. It originated about 1900 in the Hunnewell Arboretum in Wellesley, Massachusetts. Various forms are in the trade, but perhaps the most common are two erect forms, *T.* × *media* var. *hatfieldii* Rehder and *T.* × *media* var. *hicksii* Rehder. The technical characters are, in general, intermediate between the parents, except that the mature branchlets are olive green, frequently reddish above.

A second hybrid, *Taxus* × *hunnewelliana* Rehder (*T. cuspi-*

*data* × *T. canadensis*) is much less commonly seen. This resembles *T. cuspidata* but generally has narrower, lighter green leaves. In winter the leaves usually take on a reddish cast, as do those of one of its parents, *T. canadensis*.

Though usually of dioecious nature (individual plants being either male or female), yews are found which bear both male and female reproductive organs. The female structures are small and greenish and, until ripe, inconspicuous. The male "catkins" are also small, but when pollen is shed they become yellow. The pollen is wind borne and abundantly produced — so copious, indeed, that the ground under the plants may be completely discolored by it. The fruit is a nut-like seed partly enclosed in a pinkish or reddish succulent cup. With the exception of the cup, which is apparently only slightly poisonous, all parts of the plant are intensely poisonous to all classes of livestock and to humans. The poisonous principles seem to be two alkaloids and a volatile oil, which is a slowly acting irritant. Children are attracted by the brightly colored, fleshy cup in the fall. In cases where children have ingested the fruit, it is probably wise to induce vomiting or to have the stomach pumped. In any event, a physician should be contacted.

The following passage, quoted from Thomas Martyn's edition of Phillip Miller's *Gardener's Dictionary* (1807), is too touching to pass without sharing with the modern gardening public:

A clergyman, who was a curate in Sussex, informed me, that a young lady and her servant, his parishioners, being seized with an ague, were advised to take a decoction of Rue, which they unhappily mistaking for Yew, sent to the church-yard, where a large old tree grew, and gathered a quantity of the leaves, of which they made a decoction, and drank it upon going to bed. The next morning they were both found dead. This was sunday: on the thursday following, the clergyman was called upon to bury them: he performed the office on the servant, but the young lady had so fine a bloom on her countenance, that they entertained hopes of her being in a state of suspended animation, and accordingly tried the experiments usual in such cases, but without success: they determined however not to bury her at that time, but kept her till the ensuing saturday, and even then the corpse remained totally unchanged. What made it more remarkable was, that the accident happened in november, and the weather was of that damp murky kind in which the flesh keeps worst.

The name *Taxus canadensis* was first used by Humphrey Marshall in his sales catalog "Arbustum Americanum, the American Grove, or an Alphabetical Catalogue of Forest Trees and Shrubs Native of the American United States," published at Philadelphia in 1875. The plant had, of course, been known much earlier, but had been treated as a form of *Taxus baccata*. It is alleged to have been introduced into cultivation in England in 1800, though where, and by whom, seem not to have been recorded. Although by far the hardiest of the yews, it seems to be cultivated relatively seldom. Unlike *T. baccata* and *T. cuspidata*, it appears to require some shade to do well. Various gardening authorities suggest that its great value may be as a ground cover under evergreens. Rehder, writing in Bailey's *Cyclopedia of Horticulture*, says it is a "Prostrate shrub, with wide-spreading slender branches, rarely more than 3 feet high. Leaves . . . assuming in winter usually a reddish tint . . . In cultivation it becomes usually a more upright and less straggling shrub." In nature it occurs from Newfoundland to Manitoba, southward through New England to western Virginia, through west central Indiana, northern Illinois to northeast Iowa.

*Taxus brevifolia*, named by Thomas Nuttall, is a tree of the forests of the west coast of the American continent, ranging southward from British Columbia to California and eastward to Montana. It was introduced into English gardens in 1854 by William Lobb. It seems to be little cultivated and has the reputation, among gardeners, of being a difficult plant to grow. The name is said to be erroneously applied in the trade to *T. cuspidata nana*.

*Taxus cuspidata* was named by P. F. von Siebold and J. G. Zuccarini in their great *Flora Japonica* of 1826-70, though it was first described as *T. baccata* by Thunberg in 1784. It was introduced into cultivation in England by Robert Fortune in 1855. Fortune received it from a Mr. Beale, in Shanghai, who, in turn, had received it from Japan. It was introduced into the United States in 1862 by Dr. George R. Hall. In Japan it occurs naturally in the mountains of the islands of Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu. In Japan the timber has been used in water tanks, pails, and baths, and it is used for carved trays, chopsticks, clogs, and the bows of the Ainos.

In nature this is an erect, broadly conical tree, to fifty feet tall. This form is known in the trade as *T. cuspidata* var. *capitata*. Most authorities record that cuttings taken from lateral branches of the *capitata* variety do not develop a leader and grow instead into spreading shrubs. E. H. Wilson, however,

asserted that these "shrubs" generally produce a leader after some years and assume the typical tree form. Whatever the case may be, there are now more than a dozen horticultural forms in the trade which do seem to maintain the shrub habit. Indeed, it is possibly the most common yew in cultivation in the United States, where the various forms are often used in foundation plantings. In common with the European *T. baccata*, it responds well to shearing, making a dense hedge or, if the gardener has the patience, making an excellent plant for topiary work. In addition to all these virtues, it is easy of cultivation and in most situations grows relatively rapidly.

*T. baccata* Linnaeus occurs in nature from latitude 63°10' north in Sweden, Norway, Scotland, Estonia, multitudinously throughout Great Britain and France, down to the Mediterranean and the Atlas mountains in Algiers. Toward the east, yew inhabits the plain and the hilly countries to Asia Minor, and up to the Ural mountains in Russia.

In the old books several names for the tree occur: Yeugh, Eugh, Iw, Ewe, Yewgh, Ugh, and Yw are designations for the same plant. Yw is said to be the Welsh, and Iw the Anglo-Saxon. Many years of cultivation of *T. baccata* give a definite advantage to this evergreen in its use as a garden decoration. Indeed, there are about 100 named forms of the species in cultivation. The leaves are approximately 1-1½ inches in length and from 1/16-3/16 of an inch in width, varying in color from holly-green to an almost black green. One of the most interesting characteristics of the tree is its adaptability to pruning. When pruned to a desired shape, the tree's remaining branches let out new shoots in great numbers to fill out the general composition and empty volume of the tree crown.

The yew has been used for ornamental gardening as far back in English history as Tudor times. Not only were the trees used to form hedges, they were also clipped into the forms of animals, birds, and geometric shapes. The art of training and trimming trees — known as topiary art — gained popularity during the seventeenth century, to die down in the eighteenth. Such gardening tastes have not been regenerated with any comparable enthusiasm since.

Some experts estimate that the growth of the trunk, being very slow, does not exceed the rate of one foot in diameter in sixty to seventy years.<sup>3</sup> Yews reach diameters of twelve to fifteen feet and a height of up to eighty feet. It has been said that

<sup>3</sup> Sir Herbert Maxwell, "The Principles and Prospect of British Forestry, XIV," *The Garden* 84: 258, 1920.



some specimens in England are well over 1,000 years old. This longevity is in part due to the peculiar characteristic of yews to grow healthy tissue around decayed, rotten, or hollow core.

The wood used in antiquity, especially for bows and arrows, is said to be the finest for this purpose. However, in use for furniture, not only is it difficult to handle and carve, but due to the above mentioned characteristics, one never knows whether a particular stem is solid or hollow, strong or decayed. And one does not know until the wood is felled. The yew's remarkable ability to survive in spite of the frost-induced decay has been attributed to the old beliefs in the tree's divine protection and association with everlasting life. It is one of the reasons that the yew is so frequently found cultivated in the churchyards and near graves. Having seen them in such locations so often, the photographer can testify to their majestic and haunting appearance.

MARK SILBER  
GORDON P. DEWOLF, JR.

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*Malus* 'Donald Wyman'. Many comments have been received since publication of the description of *Malus* 'Donald Wyman' in the last issue of this journal. Perhaps the most interesting one came from Mr. Ralph H. Smith, Associate Wildlife Biologist at the Wildlife Research Laboratory in Delmar, New York. Mr. Smith was given propagating material from our specimen a number of years ago.

His observations are as follows:

"Perhaps you will be interested in some comments on its performance. We top-grafted it onto volunteer common apple and also budded it onto *Malus sieboldi* and common apple. It grows vigorously, flowers well every year and fruits even in the years when common, volunteer apple has no fruit.

Its bright red, glossy fruit, if undisturbed, persists in good color until late March, and in a shriveled state until the flowers appear in May. The returning robins, catbirds and starlings remove the fruit in April and May.

On the hilltops in southwestern Albany County, at 1900 feet, the pine and evening grosbeaks found our tree behind our office building and cleaned it in about a week. 'Profusion' is almost as long lasting in fruit but is not as colorful for so long. Only 'Sissipuk' holds fruit longer, because nothing touches the fruit, so far."

R.S.H.