

## Watching trees: the private lives of trees and woods in Britain's landscapes

*An Explore course over five weeks with Max Adams*

*October-November 2017*



Autumn is in full swing in gardens, parks and woodlands. Trees are all doing their thing. But they are not all doing the same thing at the same time, as a cursory look at even a single tree will confirm. Lots of things are going on: colours changing, fruit ripening, leaves falling.

In this week's session we are going to concentrate on seeds, and ask some basic questions of them:

- Why bother having seeds at all?
- What advantage is there in producing millions of seeds per tree?
- What is the advantage of producing large nuts?
- Why are some seeds attractive to birds/mammals?
- Why are some seeds 'naked' and others protected?
- Why do some seeds germinate immediately and others delay?
- What drives 'mast' years?
- How long does it take to make a seed?
- How do trees prevent premature germination?
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The answers are, in some cases, obvious. In others, there is more to reproduction than meets the eye: but the basic genetic rules apply, as they do in animals. It's all about gaining advantage in numbers and trying to make sure that inbreeding and self-competition are kept to a minimum. But sexual reproduction is expensive, as some of us know to our cost... so why bother, when trees can propagate in other, seemingly more convenient ways? In any case, there is a staggering variety in the shape, form, function and behaviour of seeds; but is there order in the apparent chaos? Of course there is..

Also in this week's session: students may have adopted a tree for the duration of the course; so it'll be interesting to see what turns up in the garden or local wood. I've been collecting seeds, and I hope some others have too. It would be great if we could get a complete, or nearly complete, set of natives. Which reminds me: I can't even think what willow seeds look like.

Finally, everyone last week had a playing card with a tree on it. Homework was to bring an interesting fact to class about that tree. I am all impatience...