



Pollards and wildlife

Have you ever noticed gnarled old trees in hedges, woodland edges, in parkland or on commons? Chances are these are pollards – trees where the top and branches have been removed, creating a distinct growth form of branches arising from a noticeably thickened trunk.



Hornbeam pollard on edge of woodland by J Volynchook

From the Middle Ages on, pollards were created to form distinct boundary features, for 'fodder hay' where leafy branches were cut to feed livestock or for producing small timber for everything from construction and cart wheels to tool handles. Pollards could be grown in hedges or thinly scattered across pasture fields, but they might also be grouped into areas of wood pasture, in which animals were regularly grazed and wood and timber was also produced.

Pollards are, in effect, aerial coppices, raised on a trunk, or bolling, commonly at a height of 2-3 metres, with the re-growing twigs well out of the reach of browsing animals.

Pollarding encourages new growth and pollarded trees can often outlive their uncut or "maiden" fellows. The gnarled bark of ancient pollards creates microclimates suitable for lichens, mosses and ferns, as well as many insects; the cracked bark and crevices can be home to small birds, bats and owls, making pollards a wonderful habitat for wildlife, as well as part of the history of our landscape.

Where to start

Don't be in a hurry, chose a suitable species in a good location; pollarding is best where there are already old, pollarded trees in the landscape.

Take time to study the tree; here are a few things to look for:

- Light is vital – chose trees on the edge of woodland, in a hedge or solitary trees; these are most likely to be successful and will often be better for wildlife too.
- Look for epicormic growth – this is the twiggy growth that comes straight out of the branches or trunk and trees with lots of epicormic growth do well as pollards.
- Also look for healthy branches and trees with vigorous growth.
- Chose younger trees – in the case of larger trees like oaks, specimens under about 30 years old are best.
- Create clean cuts that can shed water and will encourage healing.
- Young vigorous trees can have their main trunk removed, but chose a cutting point where at least 3 healthy branches can grow just below where you will cut. Alternatively, you can cut branches one or two at a time over a few years, leaving 5-8cm of the main stem.
- Trees should be grown to the desired height above the browsing line of livestock (about 1.8 metres) and pollarding carried out January to March, with a few exceptions (see box overleaf).

Why create new pollards?

Many of Norfolk's pollards are veteran trees and although re-starting pollarding might be possible, often it is too much of a shock to old trees and can make them vulnerable to disease. Old pollards should not be re-pollarded unless under exceptional circumstances and with expert supervision

Creating new pollards from young trees is more likely to be successful and is a simple way to help wildlife. The pollarded trees will grow old as gnarled veterans, ensuring the survival of this unique habitat.



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The following species are suitable for pollarding:

Oak – younger trees	Pollard in January
Acers, such as field maple	Prone to “bleeding” if cut in spring, so pollard in autumn
Hornbeam	Pollard in winter
Willows and poplars	Will pollard anytime, but disease risk lower in winter
Limes	Late summer
Ash	Although ash was traditionally pollarded, it is now best left alone owing to the risk of ash die-back disease, as young growth is especially prone.
Other suitable species: beech; horse and sweet chestnut	

Long term care

Ancient pollards were re-pollarded time and again over many years to create the huge, gnarled trees we see today. Without re-pollarding, the trees can become a bit top-heavy. Trees will need to be cut again at up to 15 year intervals, with the second cut just above the original.



Mature road side pollard – note the thick trunk, gnarled top and more slender branches



Ancient oak pollard in parkland



Young hornbeam pollard; this tree has lots of vigorous epicormic growth, so is a good choice for pollarding. The main trunk has been cut at about 8 feet high, just above healthy young branches.



Recent hornbeam pollard; the top section has died off, but the branches below will form a healthy pollard.



Recent oak pollard; the slanting cut was made just above a cluster of healthy branches.



Young pollard on a road verge

For further information and advice:

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