

Good Practice Guide for handling Oak material in areas affected by Oak processionary moth

Purpose

This document provides guidance on good practice when dealing with the arisings from work on trees in or close to areas affected by Oak processionary moth (OPM).

Background

OPM (*Thaumetopoea processionea*) is native to central and southern Europe, but was accidentally introduced into the United Kingdom (London) in 2005. It feeds mostly on the leaves of Pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*), sessile oak (*Q. petraea*) and Turkey oak (*Q. cerris*), but will attack other oak species. It will also attack other broadleaved species if oak foliage is in short supply.

There are outbreaks in Pangbourne, Berkshire; the Bromley/Croydon area of South London; and in West and South-West London, and we are hoping to eradicate the first two, smaller outbreaks. It might no longer be possible to eradicate the larger, West and South-West London outbreak, but we and our partners are working hard to minimise its population, spread and impact as much as possible.

We are concerned that OPM could become a serious forestry pest in this country if it is not controlled. OPM larvae (caterpillars) can threaten the health of oak trees because they feed on the leaves. Large populations can strip whole oak trees bare of leaves, leaving them vulnerable to other pests, diseases and adverse environmental factors such as drought and flood. Tree decline and mortality can result. Large areas of oak woodland in continental Europe have been stripped of foliage when populations have increased significantly from time to time.

OPM caterpillars have thousands of tiny hairs which contain an irritating protein called thaumetopoein, giving rise to the scientific name. Contact with the hairs can cause itching skin rashes, eye and throat irritations and, less commonly, breathing difficulties in people and animals. Contact can occur by touching the caterpillars or their nests; caterpillars can eject hairs as a defence mechanism; and they can be blown about by the wind.

Clearly, tree surgeons and others who work on oak trees in the affected areas are among those most exposed to these risks. They are also well placed to help us prevent or limit its spread, and this Good Practice Guide describes procedures by which they can do so.

Method

'OPM-affected areas' means all trees and woodland lying within the known affected areas, and within 2 kilometres (1.25 miles) of the known-affected areas' boundaries. This links with the physical survey which we and our partners carry out every year to establish the whereabouts of OPM. This 2km zone will be amended as our knowledge of OPM distribution changes, and will be updated annually.

Any person responsible for tree-work sites within the OPM-affected areas should be made aware of the contents of this practice guide, and follow its contents when working on oak trees.

Arboricultural contractors operating in the London area must have a specific risk (and or CoSHH) assessment for OPM, with associated protocols depending on whether they do, or do not, engage in OPM removal. This must be communicated to all staff who work on trees.

OPM is a legally notifiable pest. Any person involved with pruning or removing oak trees in affected areas must therefore be familiar with the insect at all stages of its lifecycle.

Before starting work on an oak tree in the OPM-affected areas you must visually assess it to determine whether OPM is present. Eggs spend the winter on the trees, and the caterpillars emerge the following spring, usually about mid- to late April. There is a greater risk of spreading OPM when the caterpillars are emerging, but are still small and difficult to spot, so much greater vigilance is required in the months of March, April and May. As they grow, the caterpillars descend lower down the trees to feed and build nests, and this is when they are most likely to be seen.

Reporting sightings

- If there is evidence of OPM in the tree, you must inform us immediately, and you must not start work until you have written authorisation to do so.
- If you have already started work on the tree before seeing OPM evidence, you must stop work and notify us immediately.
- However, making a dangerous tree safe takes priority, and in such cases you may continue work until the tree is safe, but you must report it to us as soon as possible. See 'Regulations' below for advice on handling the arisings.

Handling Oak in OPM areas

You can report suspected OPM infestations by:

- using our Tree Alert app (QR code below) or on-line form available via www.forestry.gov.uk/opm; or
- contacting the local Council. A directory of Council contacts is available under "Reporting suspected cases" at www.forestry.gov.uk/opm; or
- email to opm@forestry.gsi.gov.uk .

Thereafter you must follow the standard operating procedure (LTOA SOP) of the London Tree Officers' Association, published at:

www.ltoa.org.uk/documents/doc_download/144-opm-standard-operating-procedure

NOTE: Do not presume that, because you cannot see any evidence of OPM, the tree is free of it – adopt the precautionary principle and use your personal protective equipment (PPE). Minimum PPE spec for working in OPM-affected areas is set out on the LTOA SOP above.

Regulations

There are some regulations applying to the handling of OPM-affected material:

1. Any tree from which an OPM infestation has been removed should be left for 12 months before undertaking any pruning, to ensure that it is free from OPM, or 'clean'. If the work cannot wait this long, e.g. for safety reasons, the arisings must be vacuum cleaned as set out in the LTOA SOP before chipping and removal from site. The arisings should be taken for incineration.
2. Oak material smaller than 10cm in diameter should not be moved outside the OPM-affected area unless absolutely necessary. It should be retained on site if possible until its movement no longer presents a risk of spreading the pest. (Material greater than 10cm in diameter poses less risk of spreading OPM, but there is a general presumption and recommendation to manage larger material in the same ways as the smaller material.)
3. If oak material must be moved outside the OPM-affected area, you must first consult our Plant Health Service (see below).

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4. If arisings from a 'clean' tree are to be moved outside the known OPM infestation area, all material less than 10cm in diameter must be thoroughly chipped on site and incinerated, and not used for any other purpose which leaves the material intact (e.g. as a mulch).
5. Oak material being transported must be contained within an enclosed vehicle which prevents any material from escaping. The transporting vehicle must be washed down afterwards in a designated area with provision for preventing washings from entering any watercourse.
6. Storage of oak material before transport to an incineration or processing plant must last as short a period as possible.
7. Vehicles used for handling waste from OPM sites must be thoroughly swept out and washed down afterwards in designated areas with provision to prevent the washings from entering watercourses.

General

- Please ensure that all local tree-work contractors are aware of this document and the extent of the outbreaks.
- Use only suitably qualified contractors, for example, members of the Arboricultural Association. A directory is available at www.trees.org.uk/find-a-professional/Directory-of-Tree-Surgeons.
- For further advice, contact your local authority tree officer. A directory is available at www.ltoa.org.uk/contacts/borough-contacts.
- For advice on moving oak material outside the OPM-affected areas:

Plant Health Service
Forestry Commission
Silvan House
231 Corstorphine Road
Edinburgh
EH12 7AT
Tel: 0300 067 5155
Email: plant.health@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

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- For further information about OPM, including aids to identification, visit www.forestry.gov.uk/opm.

Tree Alert



www.forestry.gov.uk/treealert



www.forestry.gov.uk/opm