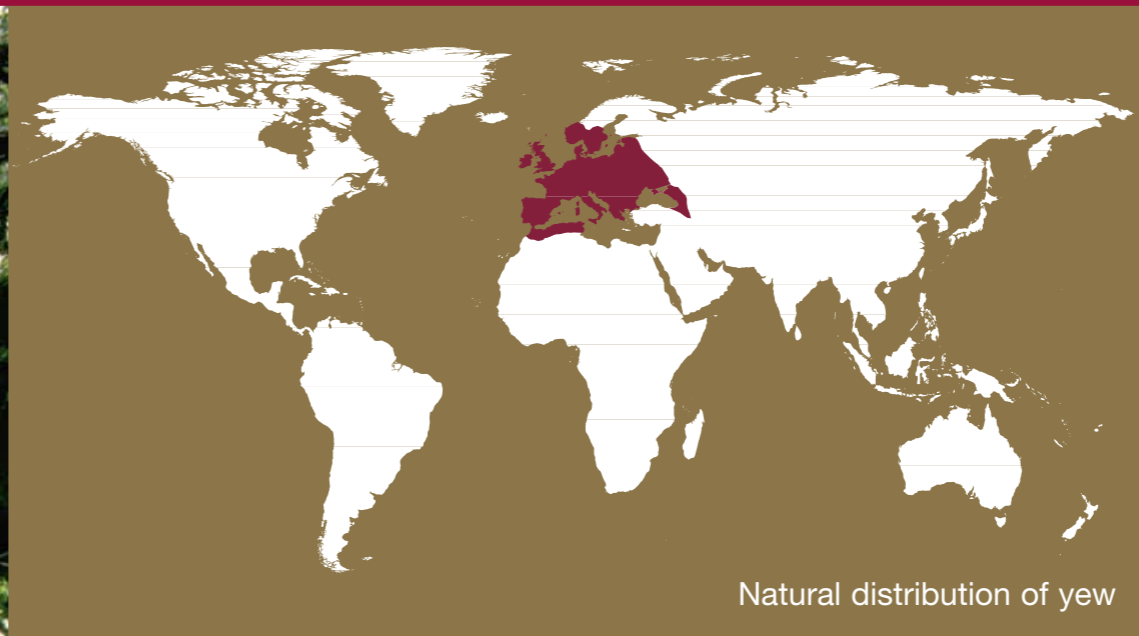


Yew *Taxus baccata*



© Forestry Commission



Natural distribution of yew



Yew needles are very dark green in colour, and grow in a flat plane on the branches. Look out for the little red fruits containing a seed.

illustration by John White

WARNING: MOST PARTS OF YEW TREES ARE POISONOUS.

We have used this tree to take lives... and save them too.

For hundreds of years the yew was responsible for killing thousands of people. Its strong but springy wood was made into archery bows, the historical 'weapons of mass destruction'. Now we have discovered that the yew can save lives too. It contains a drug, known by its tradename of Taxol, that fights cancer. Today the Taxol market is worth hundreds of billions of pounds.

Researchers visited Bedgebury during the development of Taxol because we are home to the NCCPG (National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens) National Collection of yews. This is a comprehensive 'living gene bank' containing many of the known garden varieties. The researchers tested different sorts of yew to see what levels of Taxol each contained.

Did you know?

Many yews in the UK are known to be over 1000 years old and could be much older. The oldest known living specimen, the Fortingall yew in Perthshire, is estimated to be several thousand years old.

These old yew trees are growing in the New Forest.

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