

Rowan

(*Sorbus aucuparia* L.)

Distribution & Provenance

Rowan is a native species to Ireland and the rest of Europe. It has an extensive natural range from Iceland across to western Russia and from Morocco in north Africa east to Turkey and northern Iran. It is also known in Ireland as mountain ash although it is not related to ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), the only thing they have in common being a compound leaf arrangement. In some parts of Ireland rowan is known as quicken. It is found at higher elevations (up to 900 metres) than almost any other broadleaved species. Native Irish provenances of rowan are used and recommended for planting in Ireland.



Natural distribution of rowan

Silviculture & Management in Ireland

Rowan is a common tree in hilly, rocky areas and will grow equally well on acid or alkaline sites. Rowan will not tolerate waterlogged conditions and grows best on light textured brown earths and more fertile peats. It is tolerant of exposure and is often found in odd, inaccessible places such as cliff faces, steep river gorges and rocky outcrops. The seed is naturally distributed by birds that feast on the bright red berries produced in the autumn. Rowan is a light demanding species and is rarely found surviving under the canopy of other species. Instead, it is often planted along plantation edges and roadsides to soften the visual impact of commercial plantations. It also regenerates naturally along forest roadsides and ridelines.

Rowan is not considered a commercial species in Ireland and is rarely planted in groups of greater than a few trees. Instead, it is usually planted in a scattered fashion, providing diversity of colour and texture to the landscape and so is unlikely to require pruning or thinning. Rowan does not grow to a very large size, rarely more than 15 metres when mature. It is a coppicing species which means that when cut, new shoots will develop from the exposed stump. Rowan is subject to browsing from deer and other herbivores.



The rowan in autumn turns golden and has bright red berries

Non Timber Benefits

Rowan, as a species tolerant of exposure, is often seen growing on field boundaries and around houses where it can be a useful provider of shelter. It is also a highly attractive tree, producing white blossom in the Spring and red berries in the Autumn. For this reason it is often grown as an ornamental tree in private gardens, along roadsides and in public parks. Rowan berries are traditionally used in the making of jellies and are fermented, yielding a drink not unlike perry. Rowan plays an important role as a native broadleaved species capable of growing on upland forestry sites and as such contributes to the maintenance and enhancement of biodiversity in these areas. As a small sized, light crowned tree, it is acceptable for public road side planting.



Rowan sprig and berries

Position in Irish Forestry

Rowan is not a commercial species in Ireland but nevertheless plays an important role in upland forestry as one of the few broadleaved species suited to many of the sites utilised for commercial conifer crops. Its ability to regenerate freely means that it is ubiquitous in the Irish landscape, particularly in upland areas. The species is firmly rooted in Irish folklore and was traditionally planted around dwellings as it was considered to have protective qualities against danger. An old term for rowan was "fid na ndruid" or the "tree of the druids". Its Irish name "Caorthann" features in many Irish place names such as Drumkeerin or Ballykeerin. Rowan foliage may have been used as winter feed for cattle and during the famine was used as food for human consumption.

Uses & Markets

Rowan timber is extremely hard and dense and has a dark, purplish brown heartwood surrounded by a pale, yellowish brown sapwood. It rarely produces dimensions or quantities suitable for sawing and is therefore not considered as a commercial species. However, it is sought after by wood carvers and turners. Traditionally the timber was used in the manufacture of bows, spinning wheels, and other household utensils.

Further Information

Further information on growing rowan can be obtained from your local Forest Service Inspector or any Professional Forester.



Rowan is commonly found along mountain streams

The tallest rowan recorded in Ireland is located at Glenstal Abbey, Co. Limerick and measures 18 metres in height.



Rowan was traditionally used in domestic tools

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