

West Dean Woods

Traditional hazel coppice woodland with oak standards, and a large colony of wild daffodils

Much of the western part of the South Downs, especially towards the Hampshire border, was never extensively cleared of trees in the way that it was in the east. The reserve at West Dean is a good example of how that woodland was managed for centuries — coppicing the hazel in small compartments on rotation, and allowing a few oak trees to grow to their full stature for a hundred years or more before felling and planting new replacements for future generations.

The hazel at West Dean is coppiced by volunteers in the traditional way, and through hard work and great enterprise all of the resulting wood is made into saleable produce: thatching spars, bean sticks, and hazel rods. This is a perfect working example of how a properly managed woodland can benefit wildlife — the cycle of light and shade brought about by the coppicing regime is reflected in the violets,



coppice woodland

primroses, early purple orchids and countless other plants, including the extraordinary saprophytic toothwort. Butterflies, such as white admiral and silver-washed fritillary, glide along the sunlit rides that are maintained for access through the wood.

Part of the 17 hectare reserve is managed less intensively allowing a slightly different community of animals and plants to develop naturally. Many of the oaks here support a range of unusual lichens upon their trunks, but the main attraction is the colony of wild daffodil plants – hundreds of thousands of them bloom each spring, usually in late March.



Clockwise early purple orchid, wild daffodil, toothwort