



WTPL/Margaret Barton

Big Spring Watch: Hawthorn

Hawthorn is a common deciduous shrub, most often seen in hedgerows. The bark is brown-grey and fissured on a knotted, twisted trunk. The twigs are slender, brown and usually covered in thorns.

The leaves measure up to 6cm in length and have toothed lobes. The flowers grow in white clusters, sometimes have pink tinges, and are heavily scented.

Mature shrubs in uncut hedges can reach a height of 15m and are characterised by their dense, thorny habit, though they can also grow as a small tree with a single stem.

Where to record

Hawthorn is probably best known as one of the commonest hedgerow shrubs, although it is also seen in woodland and scrub.

What to record

Hawthorn first leaf: The leaf should be fully open and recognisable as the shape of the mature leaf, although it might be smaller.

Hawthorn first flower: Record this when the petals have opened enough to enable you to see inside the flower. Look for a trend-setting flower, within the cluster, rather than an abnormally early one.

Tips

Please make your recording of mature shrubs, not newly planted ones.

Even shrubs of the same species, close to each other, can behave differently. If in doubt, wait until you can see first leaf or first flower on three shrubs.

When to record

Hawthorn is very temperature sensitive, so depending on where you live and what spring temperatures are like, the leafing and flowering date can vary hugely year on year.

Leafing can be seen as early as the first week in February, or as late as the end of April.

Flowering can be seen from early April to mid-June.



WTPL/Christine Martin



WTPL/Shawn Nixon

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Hawthorn



Not to be confused with...

There are other common shrubs that can resemble hawthorn in early spring when they are leafless, particularly **blackthorn** and **cherry plum**. However, once the leaves start to emerge, the differences are clear; hawthorn is the only one with distinctive lobed leaves.

Blackthorn and cherry plum also have white flowers, but these appear on bare branches, before the leaves emerge; hawthorn's leaves always come out before the flowers.



Cherry plum

Blackthorn



Blackthorn

WTPL/Steven Kind

Why hawthorn?

Volunteers have been recording the first leafing and flowering date of common hawthorn since at least the Victorian period, and as part of Nature's Calendar since 2000. In 2015 it will be interesting to see how fast spring moves for hawthorn leafing and flowering, and how this compares with previous years, including the Victorian period.

Our climate is changing. As hawthorn is among the most temperature sensitive of species, it gives us a good indicator of how the timing of natural events is shifting as a result of our generally milder, earlier springs.

Climate change will produce some 'winners', who are well adapted to change, and some 'losers', who cannot adapt quickly enough.

Long-term monitoring of species like hawthorn will help scientists gain a greater understanding of this issue, and provide policymakers with hard evidence.

Fabulous facts

In autumn fruits ripen to red berries, which are called haws.

The name 'hawthorn' comes from the Anglo-Saxon 'hagathorn' where 'haga' means hedge. It is effective as a hedge, but if allowed to grow freely, it will become a small tree.

Common hawthorn can support more than 300 insects.

Common names include 'quickthorn', 'May' and 'bread and cheese'

Quickthorn – Because it grows so fast and was traditionally used to make a dense hedge to contain cattle or sheep.

May - Because it can sometimes be seen flowering in May, it is also known as the May-tree. Due to its flowering period, it is the only British plant named after the month in which it blooms.

Bread and cheese tree – The young leaves are edible and were used in times of hardship.

How fast does spring move?

Nature's Calendar has teamed up with BBC Springwatch to seek your help in answering the question 'how fast does spring move?'

Recording tips

Once you have seen a sign of spring, please record it! Remember that you need to register on the Nature's Calendar website first.

Registration naturescalendar.org.uk/bswregister

Recording naturescalendar.org.uk/survey/login

Please choose somewhere you visit regularly (at least weekly) to make your record, to help ensure that you spot when something happens for the **first** time.