

Rhododendron Removal

When the Countryside Restoration Trust was very generously given Pierrepont Farm by Jo Baker in 2006, the area behind this sign was covered with rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*). It stretched from the path on which you are now standing to the fence marking the boundary between the farm and the RSPB reserve.

Starting in the winter of 2007-2008, the volunteers of the CRT conservation group began clearing the rhododendron and had largely finished the job by the end of the 2011-2012 season (clearance takes place between October and February, when work has to stop so that birds can begin building their nests undisturbed). Where clumps of *R. ponticum* remain, this is because it surrounds an active badger sett, which also should not be disturbed. However, badgers have a number of setts on the farm and move house between them, so that when a sett becomes unused, the rhododendron will be dealt with.

The *ponticum* species of rhododendron is an invasive, non-native plant that is thought to have been brought to this country in the late 18th century for garden use and subsequently spread into the wild. Because it grows to a good height even in poor soil, it soon shades out other species. It is thought that it also chemically inhibits competing plants. *Rhododendron ponticum* spreads itself by both seeds and vegetatively, with its branches spreading horizontally around for some distance. Where a horizontal branch touches the ground, it takes root and spreads even further from there.

Under the thick canopy of rhododendron, little else survives and plants and wildlife suffer accordingly. In the four winters it took to clear this land, only one bird's nest was found. Once the rhododendron has been cleared, a more diverse population of plants and insects quickly begins to emerge and this process is being recorded by CRT volunteers from the monitoring group.

The clearance was mainly carried out using bow saws and axes. Many of the shallower roots could be torn up by hand. Thicker stems, which could be up to a foot (305mm) in diameter, were tackled with a chainsaw. Deeper roots have been poisoned by drilling a hole low on the stump and close to the sapwood and then spraying in or injecting a 25 per cent glyphosate solution. In many cases, subsequent applications have been necessary. One good thing to say about *Rhododendron ponticum*: it burns well in the fireplace or stove.

If you would like to become involved in the work of the Pierrepont volunteers, please visit www.crtinsurrey.org.uk/volunteer/

This sign was first published in 2012.

Pierrepont Farm

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