

11 January 2010

## **PORTON DOWN GIN?**

The Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl), the Ministry of Defence civilian scientists, which has an estimated 20 percent of the UK's juniper bushes at its Porton Down site near Salisbury, has started a project to grow thousands of new juniper bushes to preserve this native plant.

Juniper is one of only three native British conifers and was one of the first plant species to recolonise Britain after the last ice age. Its aromatic berries are often used in cooking and for making gin. Carl Mayers at Dstl, who is leading the project, says: "At Porton Down the juniper plays an important part in the ecology of our site. Unusually we have two age groups of juniper here – one 100 years old that was well established before the growth in rabbit population, and the second, 50 years old, that was able to get a footing during the myxomatosis outbreak of the 1950s and 60s. At all other times the rabbits, who particularly enjoy juniper, have kept any new plants at bay.

"Junipers have a natural lifespan of around 100 years so Dstl is now working with Plantlife because if we don't do something now, the juniper on our range will be extinct in 50 years."

The project includes collecting berries, checking seed fertility, processing seeds and storing for planting later in the year. Some of the seeds will then be sown on the Porton Down range and protected during germination using cages to keep rabbits and voles away. In addition a polytunnel will hopefully be installed to grow cuttings and other seedlings prior to planting out. And over the winter a full survey will be completed to establish existing juniper bush numbers and select the best locations for new plantings.

Carl continues: "As well as growing thousands of new juniper bushes from seeds and cuttings, our field research will help to understand better the decline in juniper numbers across Britain – is it just due to rabbits or are there other factors such as climate change?"

The project has more than 70 volunteer supporters including staff at Dstl and members of the local community. The first part of the project, collecting berries, took place mid November and resulted in more than 32,000 seeds being gathered from the Porton Down range.

Tim Wilkins, Plantlife Species Recovery Coordinator, says: "Porton Down is a fantastic site for juniper, supporting the largest population of bushes in southern England, but even here there is an acute lack of seedlings and it is only a matter of time before bushes die through old age. We are delighted to be working with the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory to help save juniper at Porton Down and especially grateful for all the help from volunteers. Without action now, juniper faces extinction across much of lowland England by 2060. The loss of juniper would represent more than the loss of a single species: it supports more than 40 species of insect and fungus that cannot survive without it. The Plantlife project is trialling new management techniques to stimulate juniper regeneration across the chalk and limestone country of lowland England. By sowing seed beneath specially designed mammal-proof shelters, we hope to show that Porton juniper can regenerate with a little assistance."

Porton Down is one of 26 sites across England where Plantlife will be trialling this and other techniques. The Plantlife project is funded by Natural England's Countdown 2010 initiative and Biffaward.

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For more information contact the Dstl press office on 01980 658088, 07766 134768, [press@dstl.gov.uk](mailto:press@dstl.gov.uk).

For more information about Plantlife's project, please contact Tim Wilkins, Plantlife Species Recovery Coordinator, on 01722 342746, or Sue Nottingham, Plantlife Press Officer, on 01722 342757.

Images are available.

Notes to editors:

#### **Dstl**

The Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl) is a centre of scientific excellence for the Ministry of Defence (MOD). Its 3,500 strong workforce includes some of the nation's most talented and creative scientists with the brief to ensure that the UK Armed Forces and Government are supported in-house by the very best impartial scientific and technological advice. Dstl's position at the heart of the MOD means that its advice is trusted by governments, academia, industry and international partners. It offers timely and accurate

advice at all levels of military planning and operations, both overseas and on the home front. For more information please visit [www.dstl.gov.uk](http://www.dstl.gov.uk)

### **Plantlife**

Plantlife is a charity working to protect Britain's wild flowers and plants, fungi and lichens in the habitats in which they are found. It was established in 1989 after a meeting of conservationists and botanists, led by Professor David Bellamy, called for a new organisation, an 'RSPB for plants', to champion wild plant conservation. Today, Plantlife is the leading charity working to protect wild plants and their habitats with national offices in England, Scotland and Wales. HRH The Prince of Wales is patron.

Plantlife's new juniper project will be trialling novel land management techniques and promoting the most successful techniques to show land managers how juniper can be made to thrive.

### **Myxomatosis**

Myxomatosis is a disease which affects rabbits and decimated the UK rabbit population in the 1950s.