

SPECIES OF THE WEEK



Devil's Matchstick

Pilophorus acicularis

Cipín an deabhail

Devil's Match stick, or nail lichen is a distinctive club lichen that looks like an oddly-coloured match: the straight to somewhat curved club is white to pale green with a shiny black or red ball-shaped tip. These stick structures start life on a rock surface as granular crust, which is known as the crustose, primary thallus. The lichen then develops fruticose (shrub-like) stalks up to 3cm tall and 1mm thick, with the coloured tip forming the fruiting body.

The lichen is found on silicate stone in cool, moist forests at all elevations. It is more common at low elevations and is often found near waterfalls. Probably the most abundant species of the genus, most species have been found on the west coast of North America as far north as Alaska. It is found in Ireland on peaty soil, mossy rocks on heathland and also on rotting logs.

Devil's matchstick is a tripartite lichen, meaning it contains a fungus, a green algae and a cyanobacterium. Cyanobacteria are very important for the lichens survival as they can fix nitrogen from the air, allowing the species to colonise nitrogen poor areas like rocks while also contributing to soil fertility. Rock-colonizing lichens (saxicolous lichen) like devil's matchstick are also important in soil formation; they slowly loosen microscopic particles of rock, and by accumulating these particles as well as dust and other airborne particles they pave the way for mosses and other species to grow on that substrate.