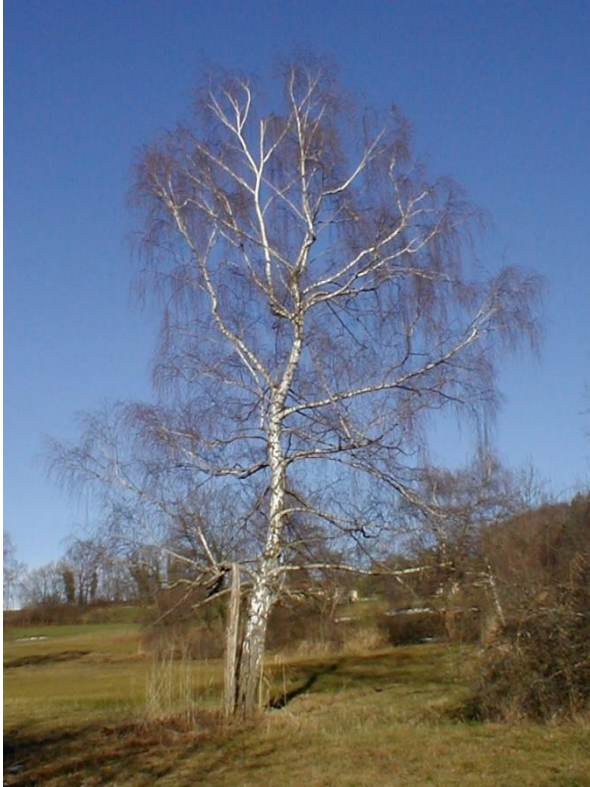


The Birch



The genus *Betula* comprises about 40 species of deciduous trees and shrubs of which the most familiar must inevitably be the "Silver Birch". They thrive in most soils and are not too fussy whether the soils is damp or dry but they like lots of light. The male catkins are elongated and pendulous in spring while the female ones are shorter and erect.

Birch catkins open around April at the same time as the leaves. The Birch is wind pollinated. The male catkins (aka lamb's-tails) shed their pollen and then break up. Their pollen blows on to the female catkins and during the Summer the fertilised female catkins ripen, grow longer and eventually hang down to release the winged seedlings which are carried away on the mid-Autumn wind. Three species of Birch grow wild in the British Isles:

- The dwarf Birch *Betula nana*, seldom bigger than a shrub, is found locally in the Scottish Highlands - it is one of the world's hardier plants, able to flourish even on the tundra.
- The two that grow to tree size in Britain are the Silver or Warty Birch, *Betula pendula* - and the Downy Birch, *Betula pubescens*.

How to distinguish them

- Silver Birch twigs are hairless but bear tiny warts and vice versa for Downy.
- The leaf edges in the Downy Birch only have a single series of teeth - they are double-toothed in Silver Birch.
- Both have white bark as the tree gets older - but it is particularly bright in the Silver Birch
- Normally the Downy Birch is a smaller tree, with more upright branches and becomes commoner as you go North and West in Britain where it often grows on damp, peaty moorlands.
- Silver Birch branches droop at the tips - which is why its scientific name is *pendula* or hanging. To complicate matters, some individual trees show characters intermediate between these two species; these are normally hybrids.



Both the birch and Brigid derived their names from the Indo-European word *bher*, "shining white".

The birch has a somewhat ambiguous history in folklore. While the tree is protector of children, protects them from the weaknesses which may arise in early life and is said to ward off evil spirits, it has also frequently been used for whipping children (hence, "birching"). Possibly the link was forged that while disciplining the children the branches were also driving out evil spirits.

Birch twigs were also used to "beat the bounds" of properties so that the exact limits of one's land were known and where the boundaries lay.

The birch is known as the "lady of the woods", reflecting its association with other trees considered to represent the female principle, including the rowan and the willow. In Norse mythology the birch is associated with Freya, goddess of fecundity and Frigga, goddess of marital life. The birch is said to be associated with the planet Venus and therefore with all aspects of love. The birch was the traditional wood from which witches' broomsticks were made, as the light within the trunks helped them to fly.

The Welsh associated the tree with Blodenwedd, the owl goddess, who can be both loving and treacherous. To the ancient Greeks the association was with Ariadne, imparting the mysteries of birth and life.

The birch has a special place in the traditions of Ogam, as the first message ever written in the secret alphabet of trees was *Beith*, the letter of the birch, used to warn Lugh (the sun-god) that his wife had been taken into the realm of the faerie-folk, *sidhu*. In Ireland and elsewhere the tree is still associated with light.

Both in Russia and Scandinavia, Birch twigs are used to beat the body during a sauna to stimulate circulation and improve skin vitality. Similar techniques were used by the tribes of North America. The Ojibwa tribe cover the floor of their tipis with birch twigs.

Externally, the sap is an excellent scalp tonic and may be used in conjunction with tea-tree oil. The tar oil is used externally to treat eczema and gout. In classical homeopathy, the tree essence of silver birch enhances the ability to appreciate beauty and remain calm - just as the tree itself brings beauty and colour to a sombre landscape. Everything is interconnected; beauty itself can have not only an effect on the mind but can also bring real benefits to one's physical condition. There can be few things as unselfconsciously beautiful as a stand of silver birches.

This is the the tree of Venus, according to Culpeper. He says that the Juice of the young leaves, or the water that comes from the tree when bored with an auger, when distilled, and drunk for several consecutive days, breaks kidney and bladder stones and is also good for washing a sore mouth. We give the usual caveat that we have no medical training whatsoever and the preceding information is given for its intrinsic interest, not as suggestions for treatment. If you are considering any treatment, consult a qualified practitioner.