

The Yew

Sacred Tree of Transformation and Rebirth

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The Yew, *Taxus baccata*, is an ancient tree species that has survived since before the Ice Age and as such has been revered and used by humankind throughout the ages. All races of the Northern Hemisphere, especially the Celts, the Greeks, the Romans and the North American Indians, have a right and powerful understanding of this unusual and remarkable tree. Because of its longevity and its unique way of growing new trunks from within the original root bole, it has now been estimated that some English Yews are as much as 4,000 years old, their presence spanning ages of time and history. No wonder the Yew is associated with immortality, renewal, regeneration, everlasting life, rebirth, transformation and access to the Otherworld and our ancestors.



There are about 10 different species of Yew in the northern temperate zones of Asia, Asia Minor, India, Europe, North Africa and North America. They are all thought to have descended from *Paleotaxus rediviva*, which was found imprinted on a Triassic era fossils laid down more than 200,000,000 years ago. Recently, more fossils of the Yew have been found from the Jurassic era, 140,000,000 years ago. So the Yew has managed to survive the great climatic changes of our planet, adapting and finding ways to live longer than most species alive today. According to pollen counts taken from peat bogs of Europe, the Yew trees grew in greater abundance at the time of the Ice Age than they do now. As the glaciers receded northwards, the great forests of Europe contained up to 80% of Yew trees, and since these times have been in continuous decline.

Ancient Yew wood tools and implements can be found in museums throughout Europe. Because it is a slow-growing tree, it has a tight-grained wood, tough and resilient, used in the past for spears, spikes, staves, small hunting bows and eventually the famous longbows of the Middle Ages. The arrows were tipped with poison made from the Yew. The entire tree is poisonous - wood, bark, needles and seed. The only part which isn't is the fleshy part of the seed. Be aware of the dangerous aspects of the Yew if you handle the tree or work with the wood. It is one of the reasons why it is known as the death tree.

The Yew is sacred to Hecate, and the Crone aspect of the Triple Goddess; both are guardians of the Underworld, death and the afterlife. A lot of our ancient Yews are found in churchyards but there is no doubt that they were there before the churches were built. Many churches and churchyards once stood in a circle of Yews, which were probably a legacy of the Druids' sacred

groves. At Amesbury in Wiltshire, there are 14 Yews in a churchyard and 18 at Bradford-on-Avon. All are growing on blind springs. The 99 Yews in a churchyard at Painswick in Gloucestershire were also found to be on nodes or springs. It seems likely that the Yews were planted with the intention of marking and protecting these powerful spots. A new system of dating Yews suggests that some of our most ancient and protected Yews are 4,000 years old and not 1,500 years old as previously thought.

The Yew is considered to be the most potent tree for protection against evil, a means of connecting to your ancestors, a bringer of dreams and otherworld journeys and a symbol of the old magic. In hot weather it gives off a resinous vapour which shamans inhaled to gain visions. Yew wood was regarded as especially magical to the Celts, due to its connection with the dead and the ancestors which were deeply respected. Archaeologists have recently found well-preserved Yew wood carvings at ancient sites of springs and wells which were probably votive offerings. Yew would have been ideal for this purpose, as it was already magically associated with the Goddess and the Gods. It was the most durable wood of the European forest, and more practically it is said to sink as is a dense and heavy wood. It is fairly easy to carve and the most beautiful of our native woods, a deep golden orange, with a deep red core which polishes up well. It was used in the past for making wheels and cogs, spoons, handles, bowls and any turned items, and the body of the lute, but it is a perfect wood to use for sacred carvings. It should be noted, though, that even the dust produced from sanding Yew wood is poisonous, and great care should be taken where you work and how you work.

The Yew tree is the last of the 20 trees in the Tree Ogham, a Celtic system in which the Druids encoded their wisdom. Each spiritual insight is represented by a tree, the first letter of which creates an alphabet system. Each letter is written as a line on, or crossing, a central stemline. These symbols can be found on the edges of some standing stones in Ireland and Wales, but they were probably, for magical and communication purposes, carved on staves of Yew. It was used as a silent communication system by the Druids, and is recorded in some medieval manuscripts. The place of Yew, or *Idho*, I, was at the base of the Mercury finger (the little finger) at the line which separates it from the palm. The connection of the Mercury finger with the Yew is made by Mercury's conducting of souls to the place presided over by the death Goddess, Hecate, alias Maia, this mother, to who the Yew was sacred. The Ogham symbol could also be communicated silently by using the shin bone as the central stemline and laying five fingers horizontally across it.

The Yew tree, or Yew wood, the Tree ogham *Idho*, is the link to spiritual guidance through your ancestors, guides and guardians in the Otherworld. The Yew is here to remind us that there are other levels of existence beyond this material plane. By understanding the illusionary nature of the life we have created for ourselves, we can live our lives more consciously. Often death is fraught with a sense of loss, but the Yew can teach us to see death as a form of transformation and that it is never final.

The knowledge we gain from the Yew makes it an extremely important tree for healing. It can help us overcome our fear of our own death and, by freeing us from this fear, bring us a greater stillness in our lives. Death heralds the ending of something. It may be a physical death, or the death of our old selves, an old way of life or an old way of looking at things. Each end, each death, is a new beginning, hope, future and transformation. Sometimes things need to end or die before the new can begin, and understanding rebirth always requires seeing beyond our limitations.

The Yew can be used to assist Otherworld journeys and to increase openness of communication with the Otherworld, through an increased ability to understand and receive the messages which are being given to us by our guides and helpers. By opening ourselves to intuitively interpreting these messages, and trusting our intuitions to act on what we receive, we can make some real progress as the wheel turns and the death of one situation heralds the birth of another.

Magically the Yew is used for summoning spirits and any Otherworld communication. It is linked to Samhain, when entry to the Otherworld is easiest, dreams are most potent and access to the ancestors is most possible. The Yew is linked to the runes *yr* and *eolh*, both ruled by Jupiter and the positive benefits of transformation. According to a modern encyclopaedia of magical herbs, the Yew is feminine, its element is water and its planet is Saturn. However it seems to me that Pluto would be a much more appropriate planet as it is the planet of death and change, transformation and rebirth. The Yew also connects through Samhain and the water element, to Scorpio, ruled by Pluto.

Because the Yew is poisonous, there are no herbal remedies, although it was sometimes called the forbidden tree as it was used to stimulate abortions. In the north, the Yew was used for dowsing to find lost property (enlisting the help of the ancestors?). The seeker held a Yew branch in front of him or her which led them to the goods, and turned his hand when he was near them. A strange belief in the north of Scotland concerning the Yew was that a person, when grasping a branch of Yew in the left hand, may speak to anyone he pleases without that person being able to hear, even though everyone else present can. This may have been useful if someone wished to prejudice the clan against a chief without receiving punishment for his insults.

Yew has long been part of funerary customs, which may vary from country to country and district to district. They mainly involve carrying sprigs of Yew which are either thrown in the grave under the body or of being thrown in on top of the coffin. In Suffolk it was considered unlucky if some Yew came into the house with the Christmas Eve decorations and a sure sign that someone in the family would die before the year was out. In Derbyshire, however, care was taken to include the Yew in the evergreens brought into the house at Christmas, although it was on no account to be taken from the churchyard, and to be used specifically as part of the decorations around the window. Yew is also put around the well-dressing pictures, a tradition of making pictures from petals and placing these by the old wells and springs, which is still practised in Derbyshire today.

With so much of our folklore there seems to be many layers of beliefs, superstitions and fears, which are usually the result of Christian overlay. The Yew, with its ability to span the ages, seems to have sustained its intrinsic meaning of death and rebirth from the time of early man, through Celtic and Druidic teachings and the Christian church, to the Aquarian age. Perhaps it is because it has stood in the same spot, on the same sacred power point, for generations of human lives.

So many of the ancient Yew trees we have in our country are protected by the churchyard, and reports of their great girths, and therefore great ages, are documented throughout historical texts. In the past they were used as landmarks, because of their size and longevity, and their dark branches would make them stand out in the landscape. Yew groves planted by the Druids were common by ancient ways, on sacred sites, hilltops, ridgeways and burial grounds. Tribal leaders were buried beneath Yew trees, in the sure belief that their knowledge and wisdom

would be joined with the Dryad of the Yew and therefore still be accessible to the tribe for generations to come.

So many of these ancient documented trees have gone now, but in recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in the Yew, and there are several books available now which are still with us. It is possible to make a pilgrimage to visit these magnificent trees and touch the awesome connection to ages long gone. A friend of mine's personal "crusade" is Yew trees, and planting as many as possible along the great Michael and Mary ley lines which run from St Michael's Mount in Cornwall, up through Glastonbury, Avebury, Bury St Edmunds and ending at Hopton on the Norfolk coast. If any one knows of a protected spot where he could plant a Yew along this line, I will pass your name and number on to him if you write to me.¹

Yew trees can be propagated through cuttings, seed, graftings or layering. It is also possible to find small trees growing near bigger trees, which transplant well. They prefer a moist, fertile, sandy loam soil, but will grow well in most soils except water-logged ground or sticky wet clay. They also grow well on chalk. They resist pollution and can flourish in the shade of taller trees, but little will grow in the shade they themselves cast.

Yew has been found to be beneficial in propagating other species. Cuttings soaked in an infusion of crushed Yew and water produce quicker and healthier root growth, though I have not tried it myself. Cuttings of Yew taken from lateral branches generally produce shrub-like plants, while those from erect topward branches are more likely to produce a tree.

In recent years it has been found that taxol, a chemical found in the bark of the Yew, inhibits cell growth and cell division, and may have some promise in the fight against cancer. The biggest problem is that such a huge amount of bark is needed to produce even small amounts of taxol.

The Pacific Yew of North America has been found to have the most taxol in its bark, but the bark is only 1/8th of an inch thick. A 200-year old tree with a diameter of 10 inches will yield 6lbs of bark, which in turn will produce 1/5th of a gram of taxol. The average amount to treat one patient is 2 grams, so clearly the problem of supply would be impossible and could result in the Yew becoming extinct. Although they have tried, scientists have not been able to make a synthetic version of taxol. Now researchers are trying to find ways of extracting the taxol from the twigs and needles. Yew tree forests as a sustainable resource could be planted. Branch trimming would probably stimulate growth of foliage and a continuous and potentially increasing supply of raw material. Experiments are being made with varieties which grow faster and may produce higher levels of taxol. A sustainable solution has to be found in order for this potential to become a reality. Already scientists in America have destroyed thousands of Yew trees in their research programme, and now the English Yew is being used for this valuable research.

In Britain, interest in the Yew tree over the last 10 years has raised awareness of these wonderful trees. We have about 250 ancient Yews which live very closely to humankind in our churchyards, and hopefully this contact with the ancient wise Dryads will help to protect the Yews worldwide, as they have offered their protection to us. Communication with trees is a very real phenomena to those who are open to receive. A huge Yew planting programme began in Britain in 1996 led by David Bellamy, encouraging the churches and villages to replant the Yew trees again.

Our ancestors revered the Yew above all other trees. It has always been held sacred and understood as a link with death and rebirth. It was used by early man for making weapons, tools of death, and now thousands of years later it is providing a possibility of averting death for cancer patients. It is a powerful reconnection to humankind for this tree when you consider that each person with cancer has to face their own death, whether they are cured or not. One of the most valuable abilities of the Yew is to provide the opportunity for people to turn and face death, to progress beyond fear to a communication with what is beyond our reality, which will bring understanding, clear insight, enriched by a deeper experience of life.