

Tree of the Month: March 2016

Alder

(King of the Water)

Month: 20/03 to 15/04



The Alder matures after about 30 years and can reach an age of 150 years growing to about 20m tall. Its leaves are an inverted heart shape and the fruit consists of long catkins (male) and shorter globe-shaped catkins (female) that turn into seed bearing "cones" that are very tactile – all on the same tree.



Alder is one of the first trees to flush in early spring. The leaves are held in a brownish-yellow pair of bud scales, set in a spiral on short straight twigs, which open to reveal the leaf. The catkins form in the autumn, remaining dormant during the winter, and flowering in spring. Alder is the only broadleaved tree to produce cones.

When the gods called all the trees together for a big feast, the Alder and his cousin the Willow stood apart gazing longingly into the waters of a flood and not paying attention. The gods grew angry and decreed that for ever after they would look out over water. So the Alder is often found in wet places and beside streams.

Alder wood is soft and does not burn well, though it produces good charcoal, and was popular with smiths and metal workers. It was used for making clogs (soft and easy to carve) and for making pan-pipes. It becomes hard and resistant to rot when immersed in water and some of the earlier bridges and villas in Venice are/were supported on Alder piles.

Alder leaves were used for refreshing weary feet by placing them onto the bare soles, and sleeping on a bed of dry leaves relieved rheumatism. Bathing in a decoction of the bark was said to relieve aches and pains, while muslin soaked in the same decoction and tied around the neck relieved sore throats. Collecting a bunch of Alder leaves, still wet with dew, and carrying it round a house would rid the house of fleas as they were attracted to the leaves and stuck to them.

When cut, an Alder "bleeds", producing a dark red sap much prized by the ancients as a dye (Roeim) and a war-paint. It was considered sacred by the druids as the "blood" (from the earth through the Alders root system) represented the health and vitality of the earth. Felling a sacred Alder was said to presage a house-fire, death or other disaster in the family. It was the sacred totem tree of the Welsh god Bran who was so huge that "no house could accommodate him".

Many dyes can be obtained from the Alder. Its flowers produce a green dye that was used by foresters (and Robin Hood) to dye their clothes, while a red dye comes from the bark and brown from the twigs. It was a popular tree with weavers, spinners and dyers. The leaves were used to tan leather.