

# Tree of the Month

## Hawthorn

(Queen of the May)

Month: 13/05 to 09/06



Hawthorn (May) is a dense thorny tree that can grow up to 10m tall and live for about 300 years. The leaves are comprised of toothed lobes, which cut at least halfway to the middle or 'mid-rib'. They turn yellow before falling in autumn. The flowers appear just after the leaves in May and are highly scented, white or occasionally pink with five petals, and grow in flat-topped clusters. Once pollinated by insects, they develop into deep red fruits known as 'haws'.

May can grow as a single stem tree, but is often found in hedges ("Haw" means hedge) along with her cousin the Blackthorn (easy to tell apart – Blackthorn flowers in March before the leaves appear and has clusters of a darker matt green, small, oval leaves. The flowers develop into purple 'sloes'.)

Britain's most famous Hawthorn is the Holy Thorn of Glastonbury. Legend tells of how Joseph of Arimathea thrust his staff into the ground of Glastonbury Tor where it sprouted and grew into a thorn tree. Though the original is not there anymore, one of its supposed descendants still stands on the hill, and offspring grown from cuttings can be found around Glastonbury and further afield in England. This Hawthorn blooms once in May and again around Christmas. A sprig of one of these Glastonbury thorns from outside St Johns Church is traditionally sent to the Queen, who is said to decorate her breakfast table with it on Christmas morning.

The leaves may be eaten and were a welcome snack for weary travellers, commonly referred to as "bread and cheese". The blossom and berries were made into wines and jellies. Decoctions of the flowers and leaves were used to stabilise blood pressure and heal facial blemishes and acne. The hard, close-grained, wood was used for carving, making tool handles and other small household items, and for decorative inlays and marquetry. The wood burns hot and well, even when green, and was excellent for oven warming and charcoal-making.

Hawthorn played a major part in the May Day (Beltaine) festivals and was intimately connected with village life. It was woven into wreaths and carried by the revellers and formed the "crown" of the maypole. Woven balls of Hawthorn were hung in kitchen doorways and lofts to keep out the evil spirits, and sprigs were carried by the "May" brides. The Church disapproved of the often irreverent and carnal nature of the May Day festivities (the sweet smell of the Mayflower was thought to act as an aphrodisiac) and started the myth that Christ's crown of thorns was made from Hawthorn (Blackthorn, with its sharper and more penetrating spine, is thought by some to be a more likely contender) and its use was declared to be sinful. It is considered by many, now, that having Hawthorn in the home is unlucky. However Hawthorn is still used in many of the May festivals.

Caught out in a thunder storm?

*Beware of the Oak, it draws the stroke.*

*Avoid an Ash, it courts a flash.*

*Creep under a Thorn, it will save you from harm.*

One for the ladies:

*The fair maid who the first of May, Goes to the field at break of day,  
And washes in dew from the Hawthorn Tree, Will ever after handsome be.*

Note: The folklore and symbolism associated with the Hawthorn is confusing, not helped by the change from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar in 1752, when 11 days were removed from the year. 1<sup>st</sup> May 1752 became 12<sup>th</sup> May in 1753. The Hawthorn would have been in blossom on 1<sup>st</sup> May under the Julian calendar.