

Tree of the Month

SILVER BIRCH

(Month: 24/12 to 21/01)

The Lady of the Woods



The sight of a close-packed stand of elegant Birch trees, with their long, slender, silvery trunks reaching up to a canopy of light green leaves, whispering in the wind blowing through the tops, is a never-to-be-forgotten experience. It is also dramatic when viewed by moonlight – the trunks seem to glow! Long, supple, reddish-brown branches rise from the slender trunk with thin twigs coming off them that become thread-like at the extremities, making delicate patterns against a winter sky.



A tough, pioneering, tree; it grows almost anywhere, tolerates most climatic conditions, and was the first broad-leafed, deciduous, tree to become established at the edges of the primordial (evergreen) forests. Fast growing, to reach a height of 20 to 25m, it lives for 80 to 100 years. The light green ace-of-spades shaped leaves appear in early March, as the male catkins turn from their winter brown to green and fill with yellow pollen ready to fertilise the smaller, green, female catkins on the same tree. The



females become gorged with small winged seeds by July that are released in early autumn. The leaves turn to a bright yellow during October, laying a golden winter carpet below the trees.

*"No beauty she does miss when all her robes are on,
But beauty's self she is when all her robes are gone" (Anon. 1602)*

Birch wood is hard and heavy, and was used for making bobbins, hoops for casks, clogs, and small items (like toys). Arrow shafts were made from the branches and the twigs were bound to Ash or Hazel shafts to make brooms. The bark is thin, very strong, water resistant, and burns well. It makes good kindling (even when damp), and was used for roofing, woven baskets and shoes, leggings, and as fine paper for writing and drawing on. The Native North Americans use birch bark over a cedar frame, sealing the edges with pine resin, to make a strong, light-weight, canoe. The sap is used as a sugar replacement in Scandinavian countries and a spirited wine can be made from "birch water".

Birch "water" (or "blood") was drained by inserting a straw into a small hole in the trunk of a mature tree in early spring, before first-flush, for no more than two days (to protect the trees). It was caught in a jar or dish and preserved by adding a few cloves and some cinnamon. It was used for treating rheumatic diseases and as a cleansing mouthwash, and was said to cure acne, clear scurf, and fade freckles. The bark was collected (carefully to avoid ring-barking) in late spring or autumn and is diuretic, antiseptic, and a tonic. It contains an anaesthetic that causes nerve-endings to lose sensation. It was used for curing eczema, treating fevers, and relieving muscle pain. An infusion of leafs was used for treating urinary infections, dissolving kidney stones, and as a relief from rheumatism and gout.

As Birch is one to the first trees to flush in early spring it was regarded as the tree of inception and purification. Its old Gaelic name is "*beith*" meaning 'inception' or 'beginning'. Birch is never still, with leafs and branches dancing in the slightest breeze, giving it a youthful, innocent, aura with a promise of spring. Birch branches were used for "beating the bounds" of parishes and districts as they were thought to cleanse the area of evil spirits. Similarly, birch sticks were used to beat the 'devil' out of people who were "possessed" and birch brooms swept magical areas clean before the rites were performed. Birch brooms with Hazel handles were used as a medium by witches to achieve out-of-body status and "fly" through the air. Venus is the Birch trees controlling planet (and goddess) so it formed part of many rituals associated with love and seduction. Young swains used to present their sweethearts with a small wreath woven of Birch twigs and, if the lady had similar feelings, she would return the compliment (the original engagement rings?).

