

*Alnus glutinosa*

[Synonyms : *Alnus alnus*, *Alnus communis*, *Alnus rotundifolia*, *Alnus vulgaris*, *Betula alnus* var. *glutinosa*, *Betula glutinosa*]

**ALDER** is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to North Africa, parts of Asia and to Europe, it has orange catkins.

It is also known as Aar, *Al* (Swedish), Aller, Alls-bush, *Arin negru* (Rumanian), Arl, Arn, Aul, *Aulne noir* (French), Black alder, Common alder, Common European alder, Dog-tree, Ellar, English alder, *Erle* (German), European alder, *Gwernen* (Welsh), Halse bush, Irish mahogany, *Jelša lepkavá* (Slovak), *Klibbal* (Swedish), Oler, Olern, Oller, *Olše lepkavá* (Czech), Orle, Oowler, Owlorn, *Rod-el* (Danish), *Roterle* (German), *Schwarz-Erle* (German), Scottish mahogany, *Tervaleppä* (Finnish), Waller, Wallow, Water aller, Whistlewood, Woller, Wulow, and *Zwarte els* (Dutch).

*Glutinosa* is derived from Latin *glutinis* (glue) meaning ‘sticky or glutinous’ with reference to the buds and young shoots and leaves.

For the Celts the alder was the tree of resurrection and heralded the beginning of the solar year. It symbolized fire (the reddish trunk), water (the green flowers) and earth (the brown bark). The trunk changes in colour from reddish-yellow to white when it is felled and the reddish colour became a symbol for blood and led to the superstition that it was unlucky to chop the tree down. In Ireland especially some country-folk also believed it was unfortunate if your journey took you past an alder.

The alder is used to wet environments and because of its durability under water according to the Roman poet, Virgil (70-19 BC) it was used for early boat building. It was also material for supports under bridges, as well as pumps, water pipes and buildings, particularly it is said in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Venice, as well as in France and the Netherlands. During the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Elizabethan era in England alder was also employed for scaffolding. As the wood is a poor conductor of heat it was suitable for two other particularly diverse uses. The branches were burnt for charcoal for making gunpowder and the fairly lightweight wood was fashioned into clogs for the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century Lancashire mill towns in northern England. In fact it seems that demand for alder was so great at that time that in southern Scotland birch (*Betula pendula*) had to be offered as an alternative. Alder was also used for moulds in the manufacture of glass. The more mature wood with its reddish tint and its ease of working (unlike harder ebony, *Diospyros ebenum*) was popular in Scotland for making chairs and this led to the wood being called ‘Scottish mahogany’. In Britain alder was used for many other purposes not least to make wheels for both carts and spinning wheels, wooden heels, water pipes, pumps, herring-barrel staves and eating utensils and implements. It was also chosen for making engineering models.

One other use which should not be overlooked and has become of increasing importance depends on its value as a living plant. Alder is one of the species which environmentalists value as it will often grow happily in areas polluted by modern industrial societies such as rubbish tips.

Fishermen in Herefordshire on the English/Welsh borders used to subscribe to a local saying which ran

When the bud of the aul is as big as a trout's eye  
Then that fish is in season in the River Wye.

It is an emblem of the Scottish Chisholm clan.

Alder is suitable for carving and is alleged to be one of the woods used in making Stradivarius violins. On the European mainland alder because of the wood's cedar-like appearance (*Cedrus*) has been particularly favoured for making cigar-boxes.

Today the wood is used commercially by cabinetmakers. It is also sought after for such objects as sluices and pumps (as it remains hard for many years under water) – and it can still be used for making charcoal.

The leaves and bark have been employed by dyers, tanners and leather dressers as they give a hard, red appearance to the material and the bark has been used for making fishermen's nets. In Lapland even now the practice of chewing the bark and using the saliva to dye leather garments has not been entirely replaced by other methods as yet. Certainly the bark continues to be employed elsewhere for tanning leather by more conventional methods and imparting its characteristic dark red shade. The bark is also used for making printers' inks and dyes. Bark and young shoots continue to be valued for dyeing materials yellow too. The flowers yield a green dye and one authority points out that a little copper added to the yellow dye obtained from the young shoots and bark can give the half-tints and flesh shadows often needed in tapestries.

The powdered bark used to be an ingredient in toothpastes. Earlier still sticks of the bark were chewed to clean the teeth.

It is understood that pigs will not eat alder, horses get black tongues if they do, but cows, sheep and goats are not averse to it.

Medicinally, herbalists would recommend a decoction of bark in the treatment of external inflammations and burns – and this has also been recommended as a gargle. It was believed that tired feet could be eased if alder leaves were placed beneath them, and it is also reported that peasants in the European Alps enveloped themselves in bags of heated leaves in order to ease the pain of rheumatism. Today alder is used in homoeopathic treatments.