

### *Betula pendula*

[Synonyms : *Betula alba*, *Betula platyphylloides*, *Betula pendula* var. *carelica*, *Betula pendula* var. *lapponica*, *Betula procurva* subsp. *lipskyi*, *Betula pseudopendula*, *Betula talassica*, *Betula verrucosa*, *Betula verrucosa* var. *lapponica*]

**SILVER BIRCH** is a deciduous tree. Native to northern Europe (including Britain) it has black patched, silver white bark and yellowish catkins.

It is also known as *Abedul* (Spanish), *Adi huş* (Turkish), *Bedwen Arian* (Welsh), *Beresa* (Russian), *Betula* (Italian), *Betulo veruka* (Esperanto), *Biork* (Swedish), *Birch*, *Birk* (Danish), *Birke* (German), *Bouleau* (French), *Bouleau pleureur* (French), *Bouleau verriqueux* (French), *Bouôlias* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Břest* (Czech), *Breza bradavičnatá* (Slovak), *Březina* (Czech), *Bříza bělokorá* (Czech), *Bříza bílá* (Czech), *Bříza bradavičnatá* (Czech), *Bříza písčítá* (Czech), *Brzoza brodawkowata* (Polish), *Canoe birch*, *Common birch*, *Common silver birch*, *Cut leaf weeping birch*, *Deruzda* (Czech), *European birch*, *European weeping birch*, *European white birch*, *Gemeine Birke* (German), *Hängbjörk* (Swedish), *Hängebirke* (German), *Hengebjörk* (Norwegian), *Karpotasis beržas* (Lithuanian), *Lady of the woods*, *Masurbjörk* (Swedish), *Obična breza* (Croatian), *Paper birch*, *Rauduskoivu* (Finnish), *Ruwe berk* (Dutch), *Sand-Birke* (German), *Silver betula*, *Slöjdbjörk* (Swedish), *Tårbjörk* (Swedish), *Vårtbjörk* (Swedish), *Vorte-Birk* (Danish), *Warty birch*, *Warzen-Birke* (German), *Weeping birch*, *Weiss-Birke* (German), and *White birch*; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of grace, meekness, and ‘you may begin’.

Birch tar oil is extracted from the bark. (Excessive tapping for sap can cause severe damage to the tree.)

Warning – in Britain birch tar oil is available for external use only.

*Pendula* is Latin (hanging, pendulous) meaning ‘drooping or hanging’.

It was believed to have magical powers that would enable it to ward off evil or enchantment yet traditionally, in many countries, the witch’s broomstick was made of birch twigs. In Scotland, the birch tree was associated with the dead (particularly ghosts) and on the Welsh/English borders until quite recently a sapling decked with red and white streamers (known locally as a ‘maypole’) was installed outside stables on May Day, for the ensuing year to protect the horses from witchcraft and from being ‘hag-ridden’ in the dead of night. Even today there are still said to be some country Irish folk who are convinced that the fairies shun birch. In Russia there are still those living in country districts who are convinced that the silver birch is never struck by lightning.

The tree is an emblem of the Scottish Buchanan clan.

Use of the birch (not least as a whip) began long before Christianity. [Archaeologists have found birch rolls in digs dating back at least to Mesolithic times (8000-2700 BC).] One custom, which was still being practised in some parts of England in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, took place on 28<sup>th</sup> December (the Feast of the Holy Innocents). Boys received a ritualistic beating in remembrance of the first-born children murdered by Herod (74-4 BC) in 4 BC. But the birch tree is associated with many other British customs. Another practice maintained into the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was that of decorating shop signs and doorways on Midsummer Day (Feast of St. John the Baptist, 24<sup>th</sup> June) a practice referred to in

15<sup>th</sup> Century parish records. Branches were taken to London especially for this, and on the farms outside the capital horses would be protected from witches that day by propping a birch 'tree' (decorated with red and white cloth) against the stable door. Yet another custom was the broomstick or besom wedding. A marriage was once considered to have taken place legally if each of the betrothed individually jumped over a birch broom held against the entrance to a house.

Birch branches have been used as decoration in Christian churches in England for centuries at Whitsun (the seventh Sunday after Easter) and is said to be maintained even to this day at one in Somerset. Oral tradition is said to maintain that the young growth represents the renewal of life, while the sound and movement of the leaves in the currents of air created in the church are a picturesque symbol of the Holy Spirit with which the Apostles were anointed -

..... And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. .... Acts 2.1

The bark (of both this and the downy birch, *Betula pubescens*) has not only served as a famine food but in eastern Asia it is also eaten traditionally with sturgeon eggs. Some authorities state that the sap was once an ingredient used in making beer too. The silvery white bark has provided a source of tannin, has also been used (in northern Britain at least) for making candles, and has been used to obtain a yellow paper dye as well.

Its soft wood, though poor, was once used for roofing material and for boat-building. It was also used to make wheels, hoops for casks, fencing, furniture and brooms (the latter in the past fulfilling both a physical and metaphysical need). Its bark (which can be peeled from the trunk in horizontal strips) provided writing material. According to Plutarch (c.46-c.120) the Greek historian, biographer and philosopher, Numa Pompilius (who ruled from 715 to 673 BC as the second of the seven Roman kings) used birch bark for writing his books. The silvery bark is also believed to have been imported into Egypt during the rule of some of the ancient Dynasties (either from central Turkey or southern Europe) as it has been found in Egyptian tombs in decorations on bows, goads and other funerary objects. The wood was burnt in forges, and was used for smoking hams and herrings, as well as for distilling whisky. The sap can be used to make birch mead or a wine.

North American Indians still use birch for domestic purposes.

It was chosen for the wings and fuselage of early bi-planes. Birch wood pulp (from both the silver and downy birches, *Betula pubescens*) has been one of the ingredients in the cellulose-based man-made fibres eg. viscose.

Silver birch is one of the species that environmentalists have found will often grow happily in areas polluted by modern industrial societies, such as rubbish tips.

The tree's essential oil is used commercially by several industries. It is an ingredient for the confectionery industry, and is also used in hair tonics and shampoos by the toiletry industry. The cosmetics industry uses it in skin preparations and toothpastes are also made with it. The perfumery industry uses tar essence to obtain a 'Russian leather' smell (suggestive of the smell of tannin-dressed hides). Then the wood is used for turning and marquetry, as well as for manufacturing veneers and plywoods (which can be found in cars, light aircraft, gliders etc.). It is also used for furniture and dowelling rods. Silver birch wood pulp is used in the manufacture of wallpaper and of paper generally.

Medicinally, herbalists have used the silver birch for treating gout, rheumatism, and kidney and bladder stones. The birch tar oil has been a remedy for various skin infections, and the inner bark has been used to treat intermittent fever.

It is the birthday flower for 14<sup>th</sup> April.