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Carpinus betulus

[Synonyms : *Carpinus caucasia*]

HORNBEAM is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to Europe, to Iran, and to Asia Minor, it has greenish catkins and leaves which turn golden in Autumn.

It is also known as *Annbok* (Swedish), *Avenbok* (Swedish), Ay beech, Blue-beech, *Carpano* (Italian), *Carpen* (Rumanian), *Carpine* (Italian), *Carpino bianco* (Italian), Caucasian hornbeam, *Charme* (French), *Charmille* (French), Common hornbeam, Common European hornbeam, Dyed hornbeam, *Euroopanvalkopyökki* (Finnish), European hornbeam, *Gürgen ag* (Turkish), *Haagbeuk* (Dutch), *Habr obecný* (Czech), *Hagebuche* (German), *Hainbuche* (German), Harber, Hard beam, *Hornbaum* (German), Horn elm, Horse beech, *Hrab obyčajný* (Slovak), Husbeech, Ironwood, *Oestrywydden* (Welsh), *Vitbok* (Swedish), *Weissbuche* (German), White beech, Witch elm, Wych hazel, and Yoke elm; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of ornament.

Betulus means ‘birch-like’.

The hornbeam was once important to lovers in parts of France, where a branch would be hung over a sweetheart’s door as a sign of undying devotion.

In Sweden the bark has provided the source of a yellow dye.

Cattle have been fed on the leaves.

The wood has been used to make charcoal. When burnt as fuel it gives a bright flame for a relatively long period of time. In the past this very hard wood was used for making ox-yokes and mill cogwheels, as well as skittles, pulleys, barn threshing floors, wooden screws, and butchers’ chopping blocks. Today it is sometimes found in pianos where it can be used for the hammer heads that strike the strings.

Apparently gardeners have long considered hornbeam to be perfect for hedging. In the past it has been used in mazes. In fact the famous one in the world for many – that at Hampton Court Palace, just outside London – was cultivated with hornbeam in 1690 for William III (1650-1702) and was the first hedge maze planted in Great Britain. (Today however the maze is made of yew (*Taxus*), the change from hornbeam being made in the 1960s when it was replanted.) Hornbeam has also been cultivated as espaliers.

Not least because the tree self-seeds, it can be used in re-forestation projects

Medicinally, an infusion of the leaves used to be recommended for a tonic.