

Fagus sylvatica

[Synonyms : *Fagus sylvatica* var. *atropunicea*]

BEECH is a deciduous tree. Native to Europe (including Britain) it has green flowers and leaves that turn yellow and russet in Autumn.

It is also known as *Beuk* (Dutch), *Bog*, *Bøg* (Danish), *Bok* (English, Swedish), *Boke*, *Buche* (German), *Buk*, *Buke*, *Buk lesní* (Czech), *Buk lesný* (Slovak), Common beech, Copper beech, English beech, European beech, *Fag* (Rumanian), *Faggio* (Italian), *Fagos*, *Fau* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Faue* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Ffawyddden* (Welsh), *Fonteau* (French), *Haya* (Spanish), *Hêtre* (French), Red beech, *Röd bok* (Swedish), *Rot-Buche* (German), *Vanlig bok* (Swedish), and Weeping beech; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of grandeur, honour, prosperity, and victory.

The small clusters of female flowers are pollinated by the wind.

Dry distillation of the wood yields an oily fluid known as ‘creosote’ (not the creosote oil which is distilled from coal tar) and this has a penetrating distinctive smell. Cooking and salad oils can be extracted from the nuts (peeled or bruised, and pressed).

Warning – the nuts are poisonous for some people (and for horses) and can cause oral soreness. 50+ nuts eaten within about 1 hour can cause abdominal pain, increased body temperature, diarrhoea, nausea, vertigo, vomiting, extreme fatigue, pallor and fainting for up to 5 hours. (In extreme cases delirium, convulsions and death from asphyxia can ensue.) The extracted oily fluid known as creosote should not be taken internally if suffering from arthritis or kidney disorders. The residue after oil extraction from the nuts is poisonous and must not be taken internally by humans – and it can also be poisonous for some animals.

Sylvatica means ‘wild, of or from woods or forests’.

Beechnuts (*faine* in French) or ‘beech mast’ used to be known in England by the name ‘buck’, and one of the southern English counties, Buckinghamshire, boasts areas of famous beechwoods from which it gained its name.

As with bay (*Laurus nobilis*) the ancient Greeks bestowed beech branches on victors in the Greek games.

Beeches are said to be able to last 900 years. Not only is the wood hard but it is said that when felled in Summer it is likely to last 3 times longer than any brought down during Winter months. When ‘green’ beech is of comparative strength with the oak (*Quercus*). However dried beech is 20% more pliable than oak in its ability to bend or remain stiff (although ultimately less durable), and it also has greater resilience to the impact of heavy loads and watery environments.

The Teutonic races, including the Anglo-Saxons, wrote on beech board. (For the Anglo-Saxons ‘beech’ and ‘book’ were the same word, *bece*.) In due time this strong and tough wood also became popular for making galley oars, wooden keels, floodgates and piling. It was not only in the original piling (with alder, *Alnus*) beneath Waterloo Bridge in London, but it can still be found also in the piling under Winchester Cathedral. Pale brown beech wood (which turns pink or reddish brown upon exposure to air) was also chosen for light fencing and for making furniture. Traditional chair-makers (who in England were known as ‘bodgers’) favoured beech as it lent itself to being turned easily, particularly in the

Chiltern Hills where such chairs eg. Windsor chairs, became famous and have been made for centuries. This wood was also used to make charcoal for gunpowder. It is thought that the first soap-making centre in Britain is likely to have been that in 12th Century Bristol, and until about the 17th Century the necessary alkali for many of the soap manufacturing sites was obtained from the ashes of burnt beech wood.

European Continental countries have also used beechwood for parquet flooring, for making furniture and shoe soles (sabots), and for fuel.

Wood chips were used to clarify wine, and the Autumn leaves (gathered before the frosts) were used as a mattress stuffing that was reputed to last for 7 or 8 years. During the 1st World War the Germans experimented unsuccessfully with beech leaves as a substitute for tobacco – unsuccessfully as their army rejected it.

Beechnuts are edible for most people and nutritious. During some of the European famines and in times of war, the mast (the shiny brown-shelled seeds or nuts) was eaten by humans. By the early 20th Century however livestock of various kinds were generally fed on it – not human beings. In France poultry were fattened on beechnuts, and turkeys and pigs were driven into beechwoods to feed off the mast. But in England this was mainly reserved for the parkland deer on country estates. The nuts are also enjoyed by badgers, squirrels and dormice let alone many others.

20% of the nut is an edible odourless oil, similar to cotton seed (*Gossypium*) or hazelnut (*Corylus avellana*) oils, and it is also considered by some to be a realistic alternative to olive oil (*Olea europaea*). It has long been used in some parts of Europe both for cooking and for lighting. The cake left from the pressing (now recognized as being poisonous) was once fed to cattle.

Beech is mentioned in literature. The Englishman, Thomas Gray (1716-1771), refers to it in his famous poem *Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard*.

There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
His listless length at noon-tide would he stretch,
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

With regard to superstitions these are often connected with its hallowed reputation. Anyone who lost their way would suffer no harm if they took shelter under the beech's branches – and any prayers uttered there would ascend unhindered to heaven. Yet it seems there has been at least one cursed beech tree – and that in England seems to have attracted some attention in the 1970s. Its home is in Sale in Cheshire in an ex-rectory garden. In 1780 the gypsy-wife of the then rector, the Reverend Poperwell Johnson, is believed to have planted it for their dead daughter. Unfortunately however it seems that the distraught mother placed a curse on anyone who in the future had the temerity to consider cutting off any branches. This long term threat appears to have been supported by accidents to at least two prospective woodmen. One claimed to have lost a leg within twenty four hours of approaching the tree and the other held to have forfeited an arm within a similar timespan.

The beech has been used in heraldic devices. When in the past the Council of Entlebuch was an autonomous body in Switzerland its banner carried a beech tree (roots and all).

Today the tar is used by the pharmaceutical industry in medicinal soaps, and skin creams. The wood is also used on a commercial basis for flooring and turning, particularly for making furniture, and kitchen utensils.

Medicinally, cool fresh leaves were placed on hot swellings, and water collected from tree hollows was used on man and beast to soothe sores and scabs. The tar extracted from the wood has been used to treat chronic bronchitis and it has been applied externally in the treatment of some skin diseases too.

It is the birthday flower for 11th April.