

*Fraxinus excelsior*

[Synonyms : *Aplilia laciniata*, *Aplilia pendula*, *Fraxinus acutifolia*, *Fraxinus amarissima*, *Fraxinus apetala*, *Fraxinus ararica*, *Fraxinus atrovirens*, *Fraxinus aurea*, *Fraxinus baurieri*, *Fraxinus biloba*, *Fraxinus boitrayana*, *Fraxinus bosicii*, *Fraxinus brevidentata*, *Fraxinus burgalensis*, *Fraxinus ceretanica*, *Fraxinus concavifolia*, *Fraxinus crispa*, *Fraxinus cucullata*, *Fraxinus dodei*, *Fraxinus eliae*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *acuminata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *albovariegata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *angustifolia*, *Fraxinus excelsior* forma *antonii*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *argentea*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *argenteovariegata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *asplenifolia*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *atrovirens*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *aurea*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *aurea-pendula*, *Fraxinus excelsior* forma *aurea-punctata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* forma *aureopunctata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *aureovariegata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* subsp. *biloba*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *crispa*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *cucullata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* forma *digitata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *diversifolia*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *erosa*, *Fraxinus excelsior* subsp. *excelsior*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *fungosa*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *heterocarpa*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *heterophylla*, *Fraxinus excelsior* forma *heterophylla-variegata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *horizontalis*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *implicata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *integrifolia*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *jaspidea*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *kincairniae*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *lacerata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* forma *laciniata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *leucocarpa*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *lutea*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *monophylla*, *Fraxinus excelsior* forma *monophylla-pendula*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *monstrosa*, *Fraxinus excelsior* forma *mucronata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* forma *multifoliolata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *nana*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *obtusata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *officinalis*, *Fraxinus excelsior* forma *paniculata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *pendula*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *pendula-variegata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* forma *purpurascens*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *scolopendrifolia*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *simplicifolia*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *spectabilis*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *striata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *variegata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *verrucosa*, *Fraxinus excelsior* forma *verrucosa-pendula*, *Fraxinus excelsior* forma *verticillata*, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *vulgaris*, *Fraxinus heterophylla*, *Fraxinus integrifolia*, *Fraxinus intermedia*, *Fraxinus microphylla*, *Fraxinus monophylla*, *Fraxinus nana*, *Fraxinus nana* var. *atrovirens*, *Fraxinus ochrochlora*, *Fraxinus oxyodon*, *Fraxinus pendula*, *Fraxinus polemonifolia*, *Fraxinus purpurascens*, *Fraxinus retorta*, *Fraxinus sambucina* var. *coarctata*, *Fraxinus simplicifolia*, *Fraxinus spectabilis*, *Fraxinus stenobotrys*, *Fraxinus steudelii*, *Fraxinus streptocarpa*, *Fraxinus striata*, *Fraxinus stricta*, *Fraxinus strigata*, *Fraxinus subcordata*, *Fraxinus verrucosa*, *Fraxinus viridis* var. *nobilis*, *Leptalix atrovirens*, *Leptalix nana*, *Ornus striata*, *Ornus strigata*]

**ASH** is a deciduous tree. Native to Asia Minor and Europe (including Britain), it has tiny, white or purplish flowers with brownish-red stamens.

It is also known as Ask (Swedish), Bird's tongue, Common ash, Common European ash, *Echte Esche* (German), English ash, *Es* (Dutch), *Esche* (German), Esh, European ash, *Frassino* (Italian), *Frêne* (French), *Fresno* (Spanish), *Fuinnseog* (Gaelic), *Gemeine Esche* (German), *Gewöhnliche Esche* (German), Hampshire weed, Himalayan ash,

Husbandman's tree, *Jasan ztepilý* (Czech), *Jaseň štíhly* (Slovak), *Kum* (Punjabi), *Onnen* (Welsh), *Saarni* (Finnish), *Sum* (Hindi), Weeping ash, and Widow-maker; and in flower language it is said to be a symbol of adaptability, grandeur, modesty, nobility, prudence, and 'with me you are safe'.

The brown keys are distributed by the wind in the following Spring.

An edible oil, similar to sunflower oil *Helianthus annuus* can be extracted from the leaves.

Warning – it can cause dermatitis. Cattle have been poisoned by eating fallen Autumn leaves and their milk yield can be reduced.

*Excelsior* means 'taller or higher'.

The name Ash comes from *Ask*, the first man on earth according to northern European Teutonic mythology. One tradition tells how the ash, called *Yggdrasill* (the Tree of Life) represented the universe. After the universe, the gods and the giants were created, the vegetation emerged and the gods then made the first human couple – the man *Ask* from an ash tree and the woman *Embla* from an elm *Ulmus* or an alder *Alnus*.

Standing for the universe and dedicated to Odin (Woden as he was known to the Germans), the ash's roots represented the Underworld. Its lower branches signified the earth and the upper branches stood for the heaven of the gods, Valhalla. The ash had three roots. Near the one which reached into the Underworld was a fountain which was the source of the primitive rivers. Close to the root which entered the Land of Giants was a fountain which was the source of all wisdom and the third root (that was gnawed unendingly by a monster serpent, Nidhogg and which threatened the ash's existence) was adjacent to the fountain of Urd, the wisest Norn (the Scandinavian mistresses of fate who watered the tree from the well to prevent it withering). In some versions the goddess of life, Idun, lived in the branches that were also home to an eagle, a squirrel and a hawk. In other versions a golden cock perches in the highest branches as a lookout to warn the gods of approaching enemies. The goat, Heidrun, ate the leaves and provided milk for the warriors and under the tree was hidden the god, Heimdall's, horn that would sound to announce the end of the Universe.

The ancient Greeks told how Achilles' spears were made of ash, and in Roman mythology the tree was dedicated to Mars, the god of war.

The ash's sacred associations, for northern Europe as a whole, bestowed upon it protective qualities in people's minds and led to various customs and traditions. Witches' broomsticks were believed to be made from ash to safeguard their riders from drowning, and the wood was used for building boats, including those of the Vikings. The Scots hung a sprig of ash over a bed to protect those in it, and as the first food for a newly born baby they burnt one end of a green ash twig and placed the sap from the other end on the baby's lips. (In other parts of Europe honey from the ash tree would be used similarly.) Yet another tradition was to hang babies in their cradles from the ash's branches so that the tree's shadow protected them against evil. In the English West Country its benevolence extended even further. If the baby's first nail cuttings were buried under an ash tree the child would ultimately become a singer of repute. The ash was also believed by many in England and Wales to provide protection against snakes ie. adders, as they were supposed to hate it. Not only could an adder be killed with one fast stroke but also a basking adder could be contained within a circle drawn round it with an ash stick.

In a completely different vein in Yorkshire in England, a young girl would sleep with an even-ash (a leaf, in the botanical sense, made up of an even number of leaflets) under her pillow so that her future partner, married or no', would appear.

There have been many local traditions in England surrounding the ash. Ashen faggots seem to be connected with the West Country especially and are said to have been an alternative to the traditional Yule log. These bundles of young ash saplings were made especially thick

in the middle to help sustain slow burning through the twelve days of Christmas – and they were bound with four to nine, or more, strong hazel bands *Corylus avellana*. The jollifications and rituals varied slightly from one place to another but everywhere the bursting of one of the hazel bands was (and still can be) a signal for renewed drinking and toasting, as well as marriage divination. Then in southern England (particularly Hampshire and Sussex, even in recent times) children took a twig of ash to school. Those who forgot ran the gauntlet of anybody who found out until midday when the twigs were discarded. (The penalty for being found out was to have one's feet trodden on.)

Weather forecasting also features in the ash's repertoire. An old saying in Britain,

When the oak is before the ash, then you will only get a splash;  
when the ash is before the oak, then you may expect a soak.

meant that if oak leaves *Quercus* appeared before those of the ash the weather would be dry and dusty and if vice versa, it would be rainy. Then there is the one that warns against taking shelter from lightning in a thunderstorm.

Beware of an oak, it draws the stroke;  
avoid an ash, it counts the flash;  
creep under the thorn, it can save you from harm.

The keys also attracted lore. A dearth was often a portent of public disaster eg. civil disturbance, within twelve months, and it was a long held tradition among many English country-folk that English ash trees bore no seed in 1648, the year before that in which Charles I (1600-1649) climbed the scaffold.

One of the most unusual English uses for the ash must be that of the equivalent of today's traffic signs. Apparently if a 19<sup>th</sup> Century coachman saw an ash planted beside a sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus* (a grouping known as 'John and Mary') it served as warning of an imminent crossroads.

There were many traditions relating to medicinal treatments ranging from cures for bedwetting or ulcerated ears to the removal of warts. One such was for whooping-cough, the cure for which required that a lock of the invalid's hair be pinned to an ash tree. A miserable way of curing diseased cattle was achieved by caging small creatures, like mice, inside an ash and when they had died the livestock would have recovered. And as recently as the 18<sup>th</sup> Century country children were treated for all manner of complaints by being passed naked and head first through an especially split young ash (split longitudinally). The precise method, the number of times the ritual was performed and the need for varying incantations differed according to the locality. After this operation the tree was bound up in different ways and if it recovered it showed that this 'cure' had worked. However the life and health of the patient could be entwined with that particular tree for the remainder of his or her life.

The ash is an emblem of the Scottish Menzies clan.

The elasticity of the wood is so great that, compared with any other tree, it will bear a greater weight before it breaks. Ash matures more quickly than oak *Quercus* but its sapling wood, known as ground ash, is also sought after. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in England first-class ash grown in the Country was scarce and the quality of that imported at that time from Europe and North America was considered to be inferior. This situation caused the Coachbuilders' Association to petition the then President of the Board of Agriculture to encourage landowners to grow more of the trees.

The strong and durable, pale yellow-brown wood was ideal for making bows and arrows and even in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century it was still preferred for otter spears. It was also used for making wheels, hoops, hurdles and crates and was much valued in the boatyard too. In Ireland ash was the traditional wood for making coracles and oars. In recent times this wood was chosen for making shooting breaks eg. the iconic wooden framework on the Morris

Minor Traveller of the 1950s and 1960s in Britain, and for coach-building (including in railway carriages). It can still be used today for the hood structures of some luxury cars such as Rolls-Royces and Bentleys. Ash was the second most important wood used in the first aeroplanes. Among musical instruments today's electric guitar can be made from ash. It used to feature widely in sports equipment because it retains its toughness after being bent into shape but it has been superseded now by other materials for skis, polo stick heads and golf club shafts, although it is still used for billiard cues. Today it can still be chosen for walking sticks (which often continue to be stocked by tobacconists in England), and is the traditional material for shepherd's crooks. (This last may reflect the old Scottish belief that cattle could not be injured by a herding stick made from ash.)

As a fuel the wood was much sought after. The attraction was not only that its maturity was of little significance (it will burn even when green – and an ash Yule log will burn for the longest time and give off the greatest heat) but also that the fragrance of the burning wood is sweet. An English saying runs

Ash when green,  
Is fuel for a queen.

The ash bark was once used for tanning nets.

The unripe winged green fruit (or keys) have been used in some European countries to make pickles (witness the recipes for this in some 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century cookery books). In Italy an infusion of the leaves and fruit have provided a refreshing tea and the French have fermented the leaves for a drink known as *frénette*.

The leaves are still collected as cattle fodder in Scandinavia and also in some parts of Britain, particularly the Lake District. However it is said that the butter made from the milk of cows that eat ash leaves or young shoots is rank.

Today the wood is used on a commercial basis for carpentry eg. tool handles, agricultural machinery, furniture, and rulers, as well as for sporting goods eg. oars, hockey sticks. The leaves are used by the drinks industry to make spirits such as *frénette* and ash is used in some proprietary medicines too.

Medicinally, the bark has been used in the treatment of arthritis and rheumatism, while the leaves were recommended for treating obesity, kidney stones, jaundice and other liver disorders. The keys were prescribed for flatulence.

It is the birthday flower for 27<sup>th</sup> December.