

*Populus nigra*

[Synonyms : *Populus dilatata*, *Populus sosnowskyi*]

**BLACK POPLAR** is a deciduous tree. Native to western Asia and to Europe (including Britain although rare there now) it has scaly-red and greenish-white catkins.

It is also known as Balm of Gilead, Black cottonwood, Black Italian poplar, Catfoot poplar, Cotton-tree, Devil's fingers, Downy black poplar, *Frast* (Kashmiri, Punjabi), Italian poplar, Lombardy poplar, *Pappel* (German), *Peupier* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Peuplier commun noir* (French), Poplar, *Schwarzpappel* (German), *Svartpoppel* (Swedish), *Topol černý* (Czech), *Topol' čierny* (Slovak), Water poplar, and Willow poplar; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of courage.

Of all its varieties perhaps the Lombardy poplar is the best known.

*Nigra* means 'black' with reference to the bark.

The ancient Greeks dedicated the black poplar to Heracles (known to the Romans as Hercules).

Not only were wreaths of the leaves worn by worshippers but victorious battles were also recognized with garlands of them.

Greek mythology tells how, for the twelfth of his celebrated labours in atonement for his past crimes, Heracles visited the Underworld and in so doing caused the dark and light shades that can be seen on a leaf of the poplar. His task was to bring Cerberus the three-headed dog which guarded its gates back to Earth and show him briefly to Eurystheus. When he started on this mission some say he wore a branch of the black poplar on his head and that the heat of the infernal regions caused so much perspiration on his forehead that the leaves were blanched underneath, while the smoke from the flames blackened the leaves' exposed upper surface.

For Christians the black poplar is a symbol of the Holy Rood.

In heraldry black poplar signifies aspiration.

One particular black poplar in Britain became an unwilling international celebrity for a short period in the late 1950s and then received further attention from newspaper and television reporters in the 1980s and early 1990s (no doubt drawn to its strange associations).

Known as the Arbor Tree it is believed locally, to be over 250 years old and can be found in the centre of a Shropshire village, Aston on Clun. Arbor Day (or Arbor Tree Day) is celebrated on 29<sup>th</sup> May. With due ceremony the tree is decked in flags suspended from long poles fixed to its main branches and these are left there until they are replaced one year later. The origins of the ritual are debated. There are those who believe that it may be traceable to ancient tree-veneration practices, and some who point to the Celtic worship of Brigit (also Bridget or in the north of England, Brigantia), the Irish goddess of poetry, prophecy and fertility, according to which local tribes hung prayer flags on her tree shrine. This adoration was to metamorphose according to certain authorities into a following of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century abbess of Kildare, St. Brigid of Ireland (c. 453- c.525) and from this to the traditional Bride Tree found in villages in western Europe. 29<sup>th</sup> May happens too to be Oak Apple Day – the day which celebrated the restoration of the monarchy in Britain in 1660 after the relative Puritanical interregnum filled by the Cromwell father and son. Records also show that on that day in 1786 the then Lord of the Manor, John Marston, married Mary Carter by special licence in the neighbouring parish

of Sibdon Carwood. A local tradition holds that the tree was dressed with flags to honour the couple and boughs were presented to them as good luck symbols when they crossed the boundary between the two parishes after their marriage ceremony. It is claimed that Mrs. Marston was so taken with this welcome that she arranged for monies to be available in perpetuity for the ritual to be repeated annually. From the foregoing it can be seen that the true origins of the flag-dressing practice may never be certain. It is a fact that the ceremonies developed over the years and that the local schoolchildren came to take part in a pageant which supported the Arbor Day proceedings – until the end of the 1950s – and that pieces of the tree used to be given to village couples on their wedding day. Somehow the word spread however that the village women were always pregnant within a year of this marriage presentation and the Rector of the Parish began to receive sad letters from childless women who were convinced the tree could help them. They are said to have arrived from as far away as Italy (and even the United States) and this must have been most disturbing for the Rector and his Parish Council. It was decided in 1960 that the pageant would have to be dropped and the event would be limited to a local flag dressing ceremony in order to quash the fertility rumours. Since then however the ritual has burgeoned again. In 1977 an annual fête was established on a Sunday close to Arbor Day to finance the flag dressing ceremony itself – and some say that the fête is gaining greater importance than the ceremony it was set up to support.

Black poplar can be seen in several of the traditional landscapes painted by the celebrated English artist, John Constable (1776-1837).

To the tutored eye the tree is distinctive and for this reason they were a far more familiar sight in the English countryside than they are today as they were often planted as landmarks. These could indicate anything from the boundaries of a parish or a manor estate to the more significant county limits, or even country borders such as those between England and Wales.

At some point the tree was introduced to North America where it came to be familiar to some of the Indian tribes there. The Cherokee absorbed it into their medicinal repertoire and used it to treat bowel problems, wind, venereal disease, rheumatism, skin sores and toothache – and they also prescribed it as a stimulant.

Medicinally, the herbalists recommended different parts of black poplar for the treatment of earache and epilepsy. Today like aspen (*Populus tremula*) the bark can be used in remedies for various urinary complaints, anorexia, stomach ailments and liver disorders.

Black poplar is also used in a few proprietary medicines.

It is the birthday flower for 11<sup>th</sup> June.