

*Taxus baccata*

[Synonyms : *Taxus baccata* var. *aurea*, *Taxus baccata* var. *fastigiata*, *Taxus baccata* var. *fastigiata-aurea*, *Taxus baccata* var. *washingtonii*, *Taxus brevifolia*, *Taxus communis*]

**YEW** is an evergreen tree. Native to western Asia, to North Africa and to Europe (including Britain), it has needle-like leaves and small green flowers.

It is also known as *Beeren-Eibe* (German), Berried taxus, *Bhirmie* (Bengali), *Birmi* (Hindi, Kashmiri, Punjabi), Chinwood, Common yew, *Deutsches Ebenholz* (German), *Eibe* (German), English yew, *Euroopan marjakuusi* (Finnish), European yew, German ebony, Globe berry, Hampshire weed, *Idegran* (Swedish), *Idgran* (Swedish), *If* (French), Irish yew, Red wood, Snat berries, Snoder gills, Snotty gogs, *Taxus* (Dutch), *Tejo* (Spanish), *Tis červený* (Czech), *Tis obyčejný* (Slovak), Tree of death, Wire thorn, and *Ywen* (Welsh); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of death, faith, immortality, resurrection, sadness, and sorrow.

Warning – apart from the fleshy red seed covering (aril), all parts of the tree are poisonous (particularly the leaves and seeds). It can cause abdominal pain, generalized stiffness, dilated pupils, diarrhoea, general gastroenteritis, vomiting, collapse with trembling, initial increased pulse then slowed heart rate, weak respiration, lethargy and death. No part of the tree should be taken internally if pregnant. In large quantities it is poisonous for animals (although those living in its vicinity can often build up some degree of immunity eg. New Forest ponies and cattle in southern England).

*Baccata* is derived from Latin *baca* (berry) meaning ‘berry-like or pulpy and juicy’.

The common name Yew (as also the name Ivy) is said to be derived from an Old English word *iw* which recognizes that the tree is an evergreen.

One tale about the remains of a yew at Fortingall in Scotland is a delightful illustration of yew’s longevity. It is claimed that in the last Century BC Pontius Pilate’s (died c. 36 AD) father was in the area as an Imperial official and while there his young son carved his initials and the date (‘P.P. 15 BC’) into the tree’s bark. Unfortunately the truth of this story is in some doubt as the yew’s remains are said to be only about 1500 years old. But in the small English village of Farringdon in Hampshire, the parish churchyard boasts two very old yew trees. One is thought to be of a similar age to that at Fortingall but the other (known locally as ‘The Old Tree’) has been estimated by scientists to be over 3000 years old and an authenticated certificate to this effect is displayed in the Church itself. Even these trees are relative babies however as in 1995 a churchyard in Llangernyw (Wales) was found to be the home of a yew estimated to be 4000 years old (and boasting a trunk with a circumference of 47 ft.).

Many birds eat the small fruit-like seeds and help in the tree’s dispersion. The seeds tend to pass through them undigested because of their resistant coating which is not broken down by the enzymes in the birds’ digestive systems.

At one time it was believed that anyone dozing under a yew tree would drift into perpetual sleep and so it came to be called the Tree of death. (The Romans avoided placing beehives nearby for fear that the bees would take in the poison from the yew, and they refused to drink wine from a bowl made of yew in case the wine had absorbed yew’s poisonous properties.) But its association with graveyards is believed to have developed

from the practice of growing yew around graves to prevent them being trampled upon by cattle for which the yew (its foliage particularly) is extremely poisonous if eaten in quantity. The growing yew was also sacred to the Druids who built their temples near it. This practice was continued by the early Christian Church and its association with places of worship continues to this day. In England during one period homes were dressed with yew branches when the body of a member of the household was in the home awaiting burial and mourners wore yew in their headdress.

Like the box (*Buxus sempervirens*) branches of yew were used during Palm Sunday celebrations in Christian churches until goat willow (*Salix caprea*) superseded them – and it was also used for decoration at Whitsun. However on one day in the Christian calendar, Good Friday (the day of Christ's crucifixion) no plants or flowers usually decorate Christian churches apart from a sprig of yew which is used as a symbol of mourning. In Ireland the yew is sacred and the wood was once used for making shrines and crosiers.

Yew has attracted much superstition and has also played a central role in many customs. The Scottish clans used to be called together with a burning cross made of yew. In the North of England it was believed that lost property could be found by using a branch of yew as a divining rod. It was thought that yew could give protection from evil spirits if grown on the south-west corner of a house or churchyard, and a piece of yew taken from a tree growing in a churchyard was considered to be an invaluable ingredient in some magic potions and spells. Nobody can be surprised to learn that for some cutting down and burning a yew tree was most unlucky, and for many it was also unlucky to take yew into the home.

Yew is an emblem of the Scottish Frazer clan.

The yew is mentioned in four or five of the plays of the respected English dramatist, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) including this from *Richard II*

.....unwieldy arms against thy crown;  
Thy very beadsmen learn to bend their bows  
Of double-fatal yew against thy state; .....

and from *Romeo and Juliet*,

Under yond yew-trees lay thee all along,  
Holding thine ear close to the hollow ground:  
So shall no foot upon the churchyard tread,  
Being loose, unfirm with digging up of graves,  
But thou shalt hear it: .....

The wood is very springy – although compared with many other regions that growing in Britain is often too brittle and knotty which explains why imported wood (particularly from Spain came to be preferred in that Country in Medieval times. Its resilient qualities explain much behind its popularity for making the long bows – which had even greater value if made from a consecrated tree. (Bowmen chose straight knotless trunks for making bows and it is interesting to note that one tree trunk would only have been sufficient for five or six bows.) The hard and heavy, dense, durable wood was also used to make agricultural implements and gunstocks. One unusual use was for conjurors' wands – as also wood from the wych elm (*Ulmus glabra*). Today this red to reddish-brown wood is sought after by cabinet-makers, not least for its great beauty and is also used by cutlery makers for knife handles. Its durability is illustrated in the fact that a spear found in Britain dating back to the Old Stone Age (any time before 8000 BC) is believed to be the oldest known wooden artefact in that Country.

In Switzerland it is understood that a decoction of yew leaves is applied to livestock to repel insects.

The yew's foliage and fruit are used as fish poison in some Asian regions.

Medicinally, herbalists used to recommend the plant for treating some heart disorders, as well as an antidote for snake bites and rabies. In India the leaves (which are viewed by some there as an aphrodisiac) have also been used to treat bronchitis, asthma, epilepsy and indigestion. In North America the Iroquois Indian tribe used it to treat coughs, colds, tuberculosis and rheumatism, and they have also used it to cause sweating and have added it to other medicines in the belief that these will be enhanced. Today yew is in demand as an ingredient of an anti-cancer drug now used in orthodox Western medicine although in the future these evergreens may have to compete with the faster-growing hazelnut trees (*Corylus* genus) which more recently have also been identified as a source of the drug. (An innovative company in the south of England has introduced a free yew hedge-cutting service for owners of large gardens in return for the clippings or will pay a nominal sum per kilo if the clippings are delivered. The relevant chemicals are then extracted from the pieces of yew.) Yew is also used as a tincture in homoeopathic remedies.

It is the birthday flower for 20<sup>th</sup> February.