

The Silver Birch!

The Silver Birch Tree is one of about 60 different deciduous species of Tree and Shrub belonging to the Birch family. It is a Tree that can grow to about 100ft (30m) tall, with a silvery, grey-white bark and almost ring-like dark fissures reaching up the length of its trunk. The bark, despite its outer shredded papery qualities is very resilient and impervious to water. It's easily recognisable branches and their fine twigs tend to droop with a weeping elegance and flow with the breeze. They have smallish green, triangular leaves with tooth shaped edging. The leaves, if moving from a particularly wet period to a prolonged dry spell can take on a small black speckled appearance which doesn't harm the Tree until they fall in the autumn.

Despite this, the Silver Birch is a very hardy Tree that can withstand severe cold or drought as well as being supple enough to cope with high winds. They produce both male and female catkins on the same tree. The male catkins tend to be more yellow and drooping whilst the female catkins are usually greener and upright - although later hang down. The fruit of the Tree appears as winged seeds, hanging in small catkins and are borne on the air.

As the Tree ages and dies, the soft wood tends to break down inside the branches and trunk and can leave hollow, dusty tubes in places, held together by the bark. It is a quick growing species and will spread well across open ground but is relatively short lived and acting as a nursing tree, giving cover and protection for the slower growing longer living standard trees such as Oak and Beech. Living for up to 80 years or so, they will then break down and fertilise the ground and become a food source for the bigger trees and the creatures of the Earth.

The Birch Tree has been welcomed all over as a useful contributor to human life. Reaching back through history our Ancestors and the native peoples of the Earth have used Birch bark for a multitude of things from boats and canoes to roofing for houses and shelters, as covering for wigwams and yurts. As well as using it for a wide range of containers and other uses including shoes and binding and even writing paper!

Birch was used for purification in Native North American sweat-lodges and used widely across Europe as twigs to beat the body during saunas to stimulate circulation and blood flow.

Birch has a connection with the whole of the year, whether it be used for lighting the fires of Beltane or made into a broom to sweep out the old year for Winter Solstice and with its bark stripped, it was burnt as the original Yule log as protection against the cold and darkness of Winter.

Its leaves, branches, twigs and sap have a wide range of beneficial properties for health and wellbeing and has held the focus of generations of celebration with its use as the Maypole.

The Birch is revered as a connection with new birth and new life - renewal and protection, the first Tree to take hold upon the cleared land and the virgin soils of the Earth where other trees will not grow!

Often known as the white Lady of the woods, we celebrate and honour the Silver Birch in our Ceremonies. We honour them during our Ceremony of Re-birth at Winter Solstice and welcome the season of the Silver Birch, leading us toward Imbolc and the time of the Awakening. We share a connection with the ring of eight Silver Birch Trees that stand around our stone circle with the ninth standing as overseer to our Ancestral Altar and the entrance to our Grove!