

Tale from the Garden!

Polishing the Silver!

Silver birches are beautiful trees, but at this time of the year they'll look even better after a good wash & brush up. A good wash & brush up is not something reserved for gentlemen in those early 20th-century films where Brylcreem was 'de rigueur' & whalebone hairbrushes were applied to backswept locks! There are plants in the garden that benefit from a bit of grooming too!

Silver birches are great garden trees. Their root system is not excessive in its spread, neither is it greedy in the absorption of soil nutrients, & the leaf canopy is sufficiently light as to create dappled rather than dense shade, which means other plants can grow happily around it. At this time of the year the silver birch's main attribute – the bright bark – is a real bonus in the garden & there are several different shades to choose from. 'Betula ermanii' is peachy cream, 'Betula utilis Jacquemontii' is a fresh, chalky white, & there are many others in varying shades, all with attractive peeling bark.

The trouble is that at this time of the year, especially thanks to the wet weather over the last few weeks, the white bark can play host to a covering of green algae, which dulls its appearance & robs it of much of its elegance. But there is a simple remedy for this – a good old-fashioned wash & brush up! Take yourself out into the garden with a bucket of warm water & a soft brush or cloth & wash down the trunks of your birch trees. You will find the green covering comes off easily. So will a few lumps of peeling bark, but they will reveal creamier or whiter bark underneath. Now the disadvantage of this is that the water will no doubt find its way up your arm as you reach as far as you can to clean the trunk & the thicker lower branches, but there is no gain without pain - & the pain in this case amounts to no more than a little discomfort! As a reward for your trouble you will find you have a brilliant tree that suddenly leaps out from the gloom to cheer you up on dull winter days. So off you go then, bucket in hand! The job will take you 15 minutes at most, & it's well worth the effort!



When the huge glaciers of the last ice age receded, birch trees would have been one of the first to re-colonise the rocky, ice-scoured landscape.

Hence, ecologists refer to birch as a pioneer species. In Celtic mythology, birch is also a tree of beginnings and came to symbolise renewal and purification. Birch or Beithe, is the first tree of the Ogham, the Celtic tree alphabet. It was celebrated during the festival of Samhain (what is now Halloween in Britain). Samhain was the start of the Celtic year, when purification was important and people used bundles of birch twigs to drive out the spirits of the old year. The Silver Birch was a highly protective influence, especially on Midsummer's Eve when boughs were hung over doors to guard and bring good luck. In Herefordshire on May Day, trees were often decorated with red and white rags then propped against stable doors to ward off evil.

Later this would evolve into the 'beating the bounds' ceremonies in local parishes. Gardeners still use the birch besom, or broom, to 'purify' their gardens, and besoms were also the archetypal witches' broomsticks.

The birch also has strong fertility connections with the celebrations of Beltane. This was the second, summer, half of the Celtic year (nowadays celebrated as May Day). People made Beltane fires in Scotland with birch and oak, and a birch tree was often used as a, sometimes living, maypole. As birch is one of the first trees to come into leaf it would be an obvious choice as a symbol of spring. Love and fertility goddesses, such as the northern European Frigga and Freya, have strong associations with birch. Eostre (from whom we derive the word Easter) was the Anglo Saxon goddess of spring. She was celebrated around and through the birch tree between the spring equinox and Beltane. According to the medieval herbalist Culpeper, Venus (the planet and the

goddess) rules over birch. In Highland folklore, a barren cow herded with a birch stick would become fertile, or a pregnant cow bear a healthy calf.

Not only did the Silver Birch have these magical values, it also had many uses both medicinal and practical. The leaves of the Silver Birch tree can be brewed into a tea that treats infection and stimulates a healthy vitality. In terms of practicality, early man stitched the bark together to make food vessels and canoes for hunting. In spring, the sap was made into a delicious mead and the fresh cambial tissue was made into a highly nutritious bread!

The word birch comes from a Proto-Indo-European root word 'bhereg', meaning "to shine, bright, white". Beithe (pronounced 'bey') is the Gaelic word for birch. It is widespread in Highland place names such as Glen an Beithe in Argyll and Allt Beithe in Glen Affric. Birch figures in many anglicised place names, such as Birkenhead, Birkhall and Berkhamstead. It is more common in northern England and Scotland. It seems that Alfred Lord Tennyson popularised the adjective 'silver' in relation to birch. When the poet S.T. Coleridge called it the 'Lady of the Woods', he may have been drawing on an existing folk term for the tree.

The uses of birch are many and varied. The wood is tough, heavy and straight grained, making it suitable for handles and toys and good for turning. It was used to make hard wearing bobbins, spools and reels for the cotton industry. Babies' cradles were often made of birch wood, drawing on the symbolism of new beginnings. In 1842, J.C. Loudon, in his Encyclopedia of Trees and Shrubs wrote that, "The Highlanders of Scotland make everything of it." He then listed all manner of household and agricultural implements as well as its use as a general building material. Though the wood lends itself well enough to many of these uses, the availability of the wood in the Highlands must also have played a part in its use. Loudon furthermore mentions that " ... the branches are employed as fuel in the distillation of whiskey, sprigs were used for smoking hams and herrings, for which last purpose it is preferred to every other kind of wood. People used the bark for tanning leather, and sometimes, when dried and twisted into a rope, instead of candles. Bunches of stems were used for thatching houses and also for sleeping on when heather was scarce. The sap can be tapped as it rises in spring and fermented to make birch wine, a process still practiced in the Highlands today. Of old, the Druids made the sap into a cordial to celebrate the spring equinox.

"Beneath you birch with silver bark
And boughs so pendulous and fair,
The brook falls scattered down the rock:
and all is mossy there."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Trees speak to me of God's creativity, complexity, beauty and provision. To me, birch trees looked like young girls dancing, reflecting the joy of living in God's beautiful world. Because of their year-round beauty, birch trees symbolize hope and new beginnings. Even after its soft green leaves fall off, the spare shape and slender trunk, with its peeling, shiny white bark, is still a lovely sight.

In John's vision of heaven, recounted in Revelation 21 and 22, the river of life flows through the city, with the tree of life growing beside it, "and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (Rev 22:2).

The nations so desperately need God's healing at this time, and I wonder if those healing leaves will perhaps look like birch leaves with the sun shining through them.

Our physical life and health, even our healing, comes from partaking of God's gracious provision in the fruit and leaves of the tree of life. Hence, our well-being will be forever sustained and renewed as we depend on Him and draw from His provision. Let's take hope from the Silver Birch & use this time to reflect on the cleansing of the past for a new beginning.

