

Tale from the Garden! Golden rain!

It's nice to go for a walk in the park at this time of year. On a sunny day you'll hear the birds singing and the bees buzzing. On the ground flower beds will be a riot of colour. But have you seen the golden rain cascading from the trees? Before you all go rushing to the nearest park with a bucket to fill with showers of precious metal, I'd better tell you that 'golden rain' is an alternative name for the laburnum.

Common laburnum (*Laburnum anagyroides*) is quite a large tree which can grow up to 7 metres tall. It was introduced to our shores in the 16th Century as an ornamental plant for parks and gardens. Then (as is so often the case) it escaped the confines imposed upon it and spread to the wild. Its seeds are spread by birds you see, and no amount of walls or fences can stop them from coming and going.

Laburnum has smooth bark and green branches which sprout dangling twigs. In May and June, from these twigs come clusters of yellow flowers which hang down and seem to be pouring from the boughs above, hence the alternative name, 'golden rain'.



A laburnum tree, in full flower is not such a common sight these days, but the burst of golden yellow flowers in late spring and early summer is truly glorious. It looks its best trained over a pergola or archway, to show off its pendulous pea-like flower clusters. Its wood has historically been used in carpentry, including bagpipes at one stage. Laburnum are often planted as ornamental trees in gardens and parks, which is a significant factor in their notoriety.

Laburnum, also known as the 'golden chain' tree, is a relative of the pea and this becomes plain when the flowers turn to fruits in the summer. It produces pods with large seeds inside just like pea pods, though black in colour. But, unlike the pea, laburnum seeds are poisonous, so don't be tempted to eat them. If ingested you'll likely feel very tired & they can cause nausea and vomiting. In the worst cases you may also have a fit or even go into a coma. They can be lethal in large doses (15 seeds or more). You'd be very unlucky to actually die but you may.

The laburnum hysteria- It's because these ornamental trees were often planted around gardens and school playgrounds that they started to cause panic. Children would play with and eat the seed pods, which look similar to regular peas. Many children started to get sick as a result and in the 1970s, 3000 hospital admissions a year were put down to laburnum poisoning. But many of these were reactionary and the children's stomachs were pumped before they could even be tested for poisoning or symptoms began to show.

As recently as 2007, children were taken to hospital after a primary school playground was extended into an area with overhanging laburnum branches. Fifteen children had to be admitted after they were caught playing with the seed pods. Many parents have cut down laburnums in their gardens as a result of nationwide hysteria since the 70s and there is a deep-rooted suspicion of these trees.

BUT - According to the book 'Poisonous Plants: a guide for parents and childcare providers' by (author Elizabeth Dauncey) there is an average of 2 people killed in the UK by all plant poisoning. The plants most likely to be among those two each year are hemlock (not widely sold) and yew. Although eating any part of the laburnum tree can cause very unpleasant side-effects, the risks of death are minimal.

Compare that that to the estimated 6 children which were killed in bicycle accidents in 2015 (ROSPA) and it's clear that there are far more dangerous things in life than laburnum trees.

If you're worried about young children around laburnum, it's best to chop off the lower branches so they can't reach any dangling seed pods. You could also erect a fence around the base of the tree to keep stray hands at bay.

So that's the laburnum. Enjoy, but handle with care!

Laburnum's symbolic meanings are blackness, forsaken, and pensive beauty. It gets its latter association since the flowers are so pretty, even if the tree is incredibly poisonous.

There's also an interesting snippet of lore that comes with these toxic trees. If you cut down a laburnum tree, a neighbouring laburnum will refuse to bloom the following season in protest.

I'm afraid quaint folklore tales regarding the Laburnum are rather thin on the ground, generally focusing on the 'unlucky' side of things (which considering the toxic properties of the plant is hardly surprising) and making very boring reading, truth be told.

Laburnums have a much more colourful CV in fiction however. It is truly a beautiful sight which has inspired poets and authors. The English poet Francis Thompson said of the spectacle: 'Mark yonder, how the long laburnum drips. Its jocund spilth of fire, its honey of wild flame.'

In the TV mystery series 'Mother Love', Helena (Diana Rigg) muses over what plant she should use to poison a pair of children and chooses the laburnum, saying, "Laburnum! Such a pretty tree – and so many of them!"

In the Doctor Who serial 'The Mark of the Rani', the Sixth Doctor suggests that if the Master turned into a tree, it would be a laburnum, because they have poisonous pods.

The novel 'A Melon for Ecstasy' by John Fortune and John Wells is, in part, about the main character's forbidden love affair with the laburnum in his back yard.

And laburnum seeds are the agent of suspected poisoning in the Daphne du Maurier novel 'My Cousin Rachel'.

In 'Wizardborn', the third book in Dave Wolverton's (David Farland) The Runelords series, Averan, the Earth Warden, chooses her staff of power from the wood of the laburnum tree.

JRR Tolkien, the creator of the Middle Earth saga, was also inspired by the laburnum – it was the inspiration for Laurelin, the primordial tree of light in his created mythology, The Silmarillion, which forms the background to 'The Lord of the Rings'. In his legendarium, a literary collection of legends, the Two Trees of

Valinor are Telperion and Laurelin, the Silver Tree and the Gold Tree, which brought light to Valinor, a paradisiacal realm also known as the Undying Lands where angelic beings lived. The Two Trees were apparently of enormous stature, and exuded dew that was a pure and magical light in liquid form. They were destroyed by the evil beings Ungoliant & Melkor, but their last flower and fruit were made into the Moon and the Sun.

Commentators have seen mythical and Christian symbolism in the Two Trees; they have been called the most important symbols in the entire legendarium.

Each Tree, in turn, would give off light for seven hours (waxing to full brightness and then slowly waning again), with the ends of their cycles overlapping so that at one hour each of "dawn" and "dusk" soft gold and silver light would be given off together. In total, therefore, one "day" of first silver then gold light lasted twelve hours.

The Two Trees embody the light of creation, which in turn reflects God's light.

Light was the first thing created and among the first words spoken by God that were written in Scripture: "Let there be light!" (Gen 1 v3). As the first created thing and something necessary for life, light holds primary significance in the Bible. Throughout Scripture, light imagery is consistently used to symbolize life itself, particularly life lived in a way that pleases God. The psalm writer praises God, saying, "For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life." (Psalm 56 v13)

When Job curses the day he was born, he depicts the living as those who have light (Job 3).

THE LIGHT OF TRUTH

Beyond the physical element, light in the Bible stands for spiritual illumination and truth. It encompasses all that is pure, good, and holy, as opposed to the darkness of evil. God's Word is "a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Ps 119 v105). It guides us in following his commands throughout our lives. In the New Testament, the theme of God's ways being light is continued: "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth." (Eph 5 v8-9) The symbolic light of truth and goodness is contrasted with deeds of darkness, which we are told to get rid of. "The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light." (Rom 13 v12) Truth is portrayed in scripture as light; it brings clarity to a situation just like light shining from above.

Light also characterizes God himself, the source of all truth. In 1 John 1 v5, we see that "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." In Revelation, God's glory is the light illuminating heaven ("The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for, the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp." 21 v23). The nature of God's transcendence is also pictured through light imagery: He "who lives in unapproachable light, whom no-one has seen or can see." (1 Tim 6 v16). In this sense light is a symbol for God's holiness and mystery as well as the purity of God himself.

Light will also reveal what is hidden. That's why we say things "come to light" when they are discovered. For the psalm writer, light describes God's knowledge of our sins: "You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence" (Ps 90 v8). John makes it clear that to draw close to God means that we must "live in the light," a relationship that is shown by demonstrating sincere love to those around us ("Whoever loves his

brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble.” 1 John 2 v10). Paul tells us that God shines light on men’s hearts: “He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts.” (1 Corinthians 4 v5).

THE LIGHT OF BLESSINGS

In 2 Samuel, David sings a song connecting light with God’s deliverance: “You are my lamp, O Lord; the Lord turns my darkness into light” (22 v29). In a world where the dark night was fraught with danger, light was a fitting image for safety. Light from God is similarly featured in the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt: “Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert. By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take” (Nehemiah 9 v19). Here the physical light of the column of fire is a symbol of God’s presence, much as the light of the lamp in the temple later signified God’s presence there.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Speaking to the Pharisees, Jesus alluded to his divinity by declaring, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8 v12). Isaiah had prophesied centuries before that the Messiah’s coming was like light dawning (Isa 9 v2). This symbolism harks back to the light of God’s presence in the pillar of fire and the lamp of the temple. Then it was a sign of something to come; with Jesus’ arrival, the reality was present.

By extension, the light of Christ present in the people’s hearts is a symbol for salvation. Those who follow him do not walk in darkness, but in light (John 12 v46). Peter describes believers as those who were called “out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2 v9). The powers of Satan are the dominion of darkness, but those who have received salvation are transferred to the kingdom of light (“For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the Kingdom of the Son he loves” Col 1 v13). Just as bringing light into a dark room changes the atmosphere and enables one to see, so the presence of Christ changes one’s heart and illuminates all aspects of life. And Christians are called to be bearers of the light. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world” (Matt 5 v14) signifying that we carry his light within us and are responsible to illumine the truth of Christ to others.

May we shine like gold in His name.