

Tale from the Garden!

Along with snowdrops & daffodils, catkins are regarded as a welcome sign of spring. Even if we can't get out into the countryside as easily as we'd like, with all the travel restrictions still in place (essential travel only!), I'm beginning to see catkins growing on trees in gardens here in Stokesley. One tree species which has catkins is the hazel.

The ordinary hazel isn't for everyone, as even in a tiny plot it will make a takeover bid! But the corkscrew hazel (or Harry Lauder's walking stick – '*Corylus Avellana Contorta*') looks fabulous at this time of year with its twisted curlicues of branches with those delicate, sulphur yellow lambs' tails that send clouds of pollen into the air when gently tapped. This shrub is grown for the jollity of its flowers & the contorted beauty of its twisted stems. The leaves themselves are coarse, hairy & rather puckered, but they are a small price to pay for a plant that's good to look at for the rest of the year, especially in winter when its catkins unfurl.



Fame is such a fleeting thing. Few gardeners recognize its once-famous namesake, Harry Lauder. Sir Harry Lauder (1870-1950) was a singer and comedian from Scotland who, in the years before WWI was perhaps the world's most famous stage performer. He was the first performer to ever sell a million records and he performed widely in Europe and made more than 20 trips to the United States. He was knighted for his fundraising efforts on behalf of the war effort for WWI but also entertained troops in WWII. Part of his performance was to appear in kilts with a twisted and extravagantly distorted walking stick.

Did you know? The word **catkin** is a loanword from the Middle Dutch *katteken*, meaning "kitten" (compare also German *Kätzchen*). This name is due either to the resemblance of the lengthy sorts of **catkins** to a kitten's tail, or to the fine fur found on some **catkins**.

Hazel trees have played such an important part in our history and folklore that it's difficult to know where to begin. After the last ice age, about 11,000 years ago, they expanded rapidly throughout Britain, becoming one of the first tree species to lay claim to the newly exposed earth. It's likely that the earliest human settlers took hazel nuts with them as a food source, which would have hastened the progress.

'Tree' is not really the best word for a hazel, because the species forms a tallish bush, no more than about 20 feet high. Instead of having just one trunk it produces several slender stems which spring up from the same root – in effect, it is naturally self-coppicing. This is a feature which humans have always found extremely useful. Since ancient times, the pliable branches of hazel have been chosen for weaving and thatching; they strengthened wattle-and-daub walls, and were cut for agricultural fencing. Hazel leaves are finely serrated and rounded in shape, coming to quite a sudden point at the end. They appear after the catkins, and often turn a vivid shade of yellow before dropping in autumn.

Both male and female flowers are borne on the same tree. The catkins are the male flowers, and when they are fully open they produce little clouds of pollen that are dispersed by the wind, to settle onto the tiny red female flowers. The fruits ripen into hazel nuts in late autumn.

Hazel is a valuable food source for a huge array of wildlife. Red squirrels, wood mice, dormice, jays, woodpeckers and nuthatches feed on the nuts, while the leaves provide food for red deer, roe deer, and the caterpillars of many moths and butterflies. Coppiced hazel offers shelter for ground-nesting birds

like nightjars, nightingales, willow warblers and yellowhammers. A whole world of lichens, liverworts and mosses thrive on its greyish-brown bark.

Known as the Tree of Knowledge in Norse mythology, the hazel was sacred to the god Thor; in Irish and Welsh folklore, the hazel was believed to be a fairy tree, and it still grows near many holy wells. Tara, the seat of ancient Irish kings, was located close to a hazel wood; & it is said that members of the Fianna, a legendary band of Irish warriors, learned to defend themselves with only a hazel stick and a shield.

The salmon of wisdom... According to an ancient Irish legend, a hazel tree bent its branches over the Well of Wisdom. Nine hazel nuts fell into the pool, and were eaten by salmon, a fish revered by the druids. The fish developed bright spots on their scales according to how many nuts they had eaten. Later, while cooking one of these salmon for his druid master, a young lad called Fionn mac Cumhaill couldn't resist eating some of the fish himself. In so doing, he absorbed the salmon's magical knowledge and grew up to become one of the most heroic figures in Irish mythology. The old belief that hazel nuts contained so much bite-sized wisdom is the source of the phrase 'in a nutshell'!

The old Irish word for hazel, 'coll', crops up in many place names, the most obvious being the island of Coll off the west coast of Scotland. Others have developed from the Scottish Gaelic word 'calltuin', which means 'hazel grove': Barcaldine in Argyll, and Calton Hill in Edinburgh are just two examples. It is also associated with Clan Colquhoun whose clan badge is the hazel. In the Ogham tree alphabet favoured by poet and historian Robert Graves, the letter C is represented by Coll, the hazel.

Feast Days

Cultivated hazelnuts are called filberts, taking their name from St Philibert's Day on 20th August, the date by which, traditionally, they are supposed to begin ripening. (Wild hazel nuts are often known as cob nuts.)

Holy Cross Day on 14th September was a school holiday up until the First World War, giving school children a chance to gather the nuts.

Nutcrack Night was celebrated during November, when the first of the stored nuts were cracked and eaten. Some churchgoers apparently enjoyed them so much that they would take a pocketful to church on the following Sunday, and crack them during the sermon!

And because it's Valentine's Day this weekend, Hazel catkins can aid in your favourite Spell for Love: Light a red or pink candle and gather some catkins of the Hazel tree & wrap them in a piece of red or pink tissue paper. Hold it in your hand over your heart as you recite your incantation. Burn the bundle while visualizing your intent ... and maybe, just maybe ...

Like little tails of little lambs,
On leafless twigs my catkins swing;
They dingle-dangle merrily
Before the wakening of Spring.
Beside the pollen-laden tails
My tiny crimson tufts you see
The promise of the autumn nuts
Upon the slender hazel tree.
While yet the woods lie grey and still
I give my tidings: "Spring is near!"
One day the land shall leap to life
With fairies calling: "Spring is HERE!"



THE MAGIC OF HAZEL

"The air surrounding hazel trees is said to be magically charged with the quicksilver energy of exhilaration and inspiration."

In folklore, the hazel tree is associated with the goddess Brigid, who brings divine inspiration. Forked branches of hazel were, & still are, used for dowsing, and an ancient belief in its protective qualities made a hazel staff the accessory of choice for pilgrims, shepherds and other countryside wanderers. Magic wands were fashioned from hazel, and it was once thought that if you wore a crown of hazel twigs and wished very hard, your wish would come true!

What would you wish for right now? To be able to go out & meet up with friends? To gather family together in one household? To return to church for fellowship & worship?

Is it wrong to wish for something? Are Christians allowed to wish?

To wish is to be human. God created us with a free will and the ability to choose, therefore wanting or being hopeful or getting something (or "wishing") in and of itself is not wrong.

Did you know that even Jesus Himself has said He wished for something? In Revelation 3:15 Jesus says, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot." And Luke 12:49, He says, "I have come to cast fire upon the earth and how I wish it were already kindled!"

Perhaps the most memorable time in the Bible that Jesus makes a wish is when He is praying before the crucifixion (Luke 22:42). He asks His Heavenly Father for another way to save humanity. He prayed, asking the Lord to "remove this cup." But here is the most important part: He ended His prayer with, "not my will but yours be done."

The Right Kind of Wish

When we wish, we have to really look at that wish and see if it is in line with God's will. How do we know? Well, some things are very clearly NOT God's will. For example, if what you are wishing for is a sin or would cause you to sin, then that wish is wrong and would not be honoured by God. Another example is wishing for more than we actually need (1 Timothy 6:9-10). If our wishes are rooted in an ungrateful heart for something that we cannot change, then that wish is wrong. Our goal should be to be content with the gifts, talents, family, body, everything really, that God has given us.

Ask yourself, "Is my wish coming from an ungratefulness for what I already have?"

While we should be content in what we have, we can still work toward something new. But we need to be satisfied and grateful to the Lord for what we have now (Colossians 3:16; 1 Corinthians 10:31).

Godly Wishes

Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart." Bringing glory and honour to God should be our greatest goal, and when that is our focus, our wishes will surely change to reflect His desires.

There are things that Bible commands us to wish for: spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14:1), wisdom (Proverbs 24:14), the Day of the Lord (2 Peter 3:12), salvation of others (Romans 10:1), and revealing who the children of God are (Romans 8:19).

So, is wishing wrong? Not at all. But check your wish, and see where it originates from in your heart. Is it something that will bring you closer to the Lord and bring honour to Him?

One more thing to remember: Wishing is to be an appeal to God Himself and not just a "wish upon a star." Why wish upon a star, when you can bring your request to the Creator of the star?