

# Tale from the Garden!

You'll all have taken down & put away your Christmas decorations this week, including the Angel (or Fairy) at the top of the Christmas tree. Things certainly look bare after all the colour & sparkle of the festive season. But that's not the story in nature ... the pretty Christmas Fairy reminded me of the magic & loveliness of Cicely Mary Barker's famous Flower Fairies.

First published in the 1920s, Cicely Mary Barker's original Flower Fairies books have been loved for generations. The books feature delightful poems and full-colour illustrations of over 20 flowers for each season & their guardian fairies. Flower Fairies of the Winter celebrates the end of the natural cycle and introduces children to the season's wild & familiar winter flowers by making them magical. Winter favourites to be found in Flower Fairies of the Winter include: The Christmas Tree Fairy, The Holly Fairy, The Winter Jasmine Fairy.

But I've picked a less well known one because I think the poem sends a message of hope, after the grey & bareness of the winter (& after the bleakness of the Covid years) the Spring always follows – it's the Plane Tree Fairy.



You will not find him in the wood,  
Nor in the country lane;  
But in the city's parks and streets  
You'll see the Plane.

O turn your eyes from pavements grey,  
And look you up instead,  
To where the Plane tree's pretty balls  
Hang overhead!

When he has shed his golden leaves,  
His balls will yet remain,  
To deck the tree until the Spring  
Comes back again!

And in finding out about this tree species, I discovered it has quite a history:

London is culturally an incredibly diverse city, with only around 45% of the population being white British born. But it is not just the human population that is varied in its makeup, as the commonest tree in the city, accounting for over half of all trees, is the London Plane, which is also originally a mix of foreign blood – or should I say sap! The London Plane is a product of the coming together of two tree species from opposite sides of the globe: the Oriental Plane (*Platanus Orientalis*) and the American Sycamore (*Platanus Occidentalis*). London plane also sometimes goes by the name of *Platanus Hispanica*, as the hybrid tree was thought to have perhaps originated from Spain, where the hybridisation had first occurred naturally between two imported trees. It appears to have first arrived on our shores in the 17th century.

Once here, the tree became popular and records show that two London plane trees were presented to the Bishop of Lincoln around 1663, and these are both still growing at Buckden Towers in Cambridgeshire, making them over 350 years old. Another tree that still thrives and was also planted around this time was planted by the Bishop of Ely at Ely Palace in 1680.

The tallest London plane in Europe can be found growing at Bryanston School in Dorset, measuring in at 48.5 metres tall, (most recently re-measured in 2008). It lives alongside several others that have reached more than 40 metres in an avenue planted in 1749 to mark the centenary of the execution of Charles I. The tree at Ely, however, has a girth of over nine metres, making it the largest in Britain.

The oldest trees within London are probably those growing in Berkeley Square, thought to have been planted in 1789, making them 220 years old. So how did this hybrid species become known as the London plane tree, especially as it is found all over Europe, Australia and in North and South America?

Well, the tree has many interesting characteristics. Firstly, the khaki camouflage-patterned bark, with its mottled mix of grey, olive and cream, constantly regenerates itself by allowing sections to peel off, meaning that the tree does not collect damaging pollutants on its trunk. The large, thick, quite leathery, maple-shaped leaves also manage to wash themselves clean of dirt every time there is rain, leaving them looking green and fresh. They also turn a colourful golden yellow in autumn.

Add to these traits the fact that the tree does not seem to mind cold winters or hot, dry summers and will grow on any soil type – including badly compacted soils – and you begin to see why it might do well in an urban setting. It also appears quite happy to be pruned to keep its size in check!

Once the Industrial Revolution got underway and all Londoners kept warm beside coal fires, the city became blackened with pollutants and soot. However, in amongst all this filth, people soon noticed that the plane tree grew well and stayed refreshingly green amongst all the grime. So, the tree was planted throughout the city in great numbers, eventually earning it the name of the “London plane”.

One of the only drawbacks with this tree appears to be when the fruits appear. The ball-shaped male and female flowers are found on the same tree, although on different stems. After the female flowers have been pollinated with the help of the wind, spiky fruits will eventually appear. These fruits are made up of a dense cluster of seeds with stiff hairs, which will help them to disperse during winter gales. Some people have found that these seeds can induce allergic reactions, ranging from rashes to asthma.

Many a mischievous school child will have had great fun with these hairy seeds, as it was common knowledge that when crushed up, they made excellent itching powder! A little sprinkling of the ground-up powder placed in a delicate spot could well result in a wonderful Irish jig performance, to such a high standard that even Michael Flatley would have been impressed!

According to the London Tree Report, the London Plane tree is one of the most 'important species' in Inner London (but not Greater London) along with Birch, Lime & Apple. The report also notes that London plane trees make up the largest leaf area of all tree species in Inner London, potentially bringing the most benefits for air quality and shade.

Human beings are like trees, in the way that we prosper when nourished & when we are blessed with all our basic needs. Psalm 1 v3 says ‘Blessed is the man .... He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season & whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.’ There is a time for everything. And at this time of the year, it’s a time for growth, renewal, healing and a fresh start. It’s a time to move forward, towards new beginnings. It’s a time for faith, love & hope. Even if it feels like the night or the winter season has been with us for so long, may we not get tired of waiting for the sun to rise. As a new season unveils, let it be a blessing to everyone to start anew and celebrate.

There are times we lose our way, disheartened to the point that we lose our faith in God. Things may not go as planned or our prayers may not have been answered right away. But we can be assured that although God delays, he never forgets. The season of Spring brings hope. Let this be a start of rekindling your faith in the Lord Almighty. Trust in Him, and you will prosper.

Hosea 6 v3 “Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.”

Genesis 8m v22 “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.”

Let us believe in His blessings - both visible and invisible. Follow His words, be righteous and loving, and do good deeds to others. Let Him lead you to the right way. That’s the essence of Spring.