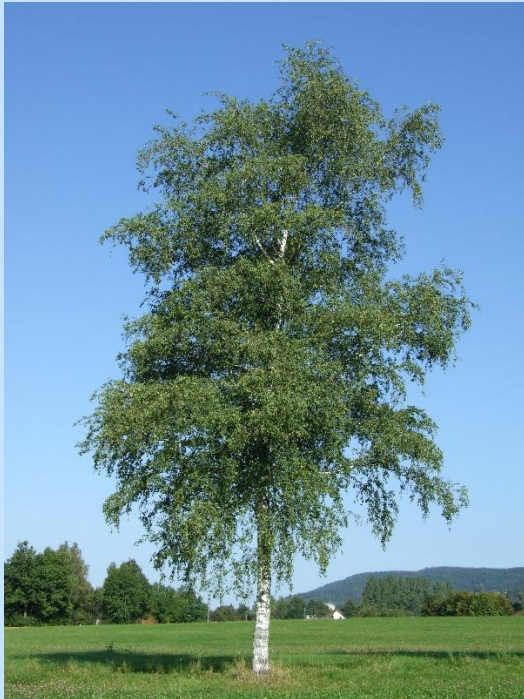


## ***Betula pendula***



This common site in our parks and cities is *Betula pendula*, commonly known as the silver birch tree. Like all trees, it is a vital component of our environment, providing habitat for wildlife and helping to provide cleaner air, whilst also making people feel good when they go out in nature.

Part of the *Betulaceae* family, it is a medium-sized deciduous tree, which can reach up to 30 metres in height. Being monoecious, the tree carries both male and female flowers (catkins) which usually appear throughout April and May. Its windblown seeds are easily spread, so it is often referred to as a pioneer species. It is commonly recognised by its distinctive papery white bark, which helps to distinguish it from our other native birch, the downy birch (*Betula pubescens*) which is more common in Scotland – although the two will readily hybridise.

The tree is native to the UK (has grown here since the end of the last ice age, over 11,000 years ago) and so has thousands of years of folklore attached to it, as well as being useful both commercially and medicinally.

### **Uses**

Whilst not a large tree, birch wood is tough, which makes it suitable for furniture making, whilst it also used to be used to make things such as bobbins, spools and reels for the Lancashire cotton industry. The bark is used for tanning leather owing to its astringent properties, which also explains some of its medicinal usage.

### **Medicinal Uses**

The leaves and bark may be used medicinally, and have both bitter and astringent properties (bitterness helping to stimulate digestion, and astringency helping to tighten mucous membranes). Its main actions are anti-inflammatory and diuretic, and so is used for inflammatory diseases of the urinary tract, as well as arthritis, rheumatism and gout. In addition, birch tar oil has been used for skin conditions, and betulinic acid from the bark has been shown to have anti-cancer and anti-HIV properties. It's contraindicated with cardiac or renal failure, and its use should be avoided with iron supplements as absorption may be diminished.

### **Folklore**

The birch tree is associated with purification – it was used for flogging to drive out evil spirits, and was traditionally used in UK schools for corporal punishment. It is also associated with protection, guarding people and livestock when carried or attached to their dwelling. The birch is known as a tree of fertility: in the Nordic tradition it's a symbol of the earth mother, and in the UK, the tree was often used to make May poles. Birch twigs are also used to make besoms, better known as a witches' brooms.

*Please note: this sheet is provided for information only and does not constitute medical advice. Please refer to your healthcare provider for any questions or issues raised.*