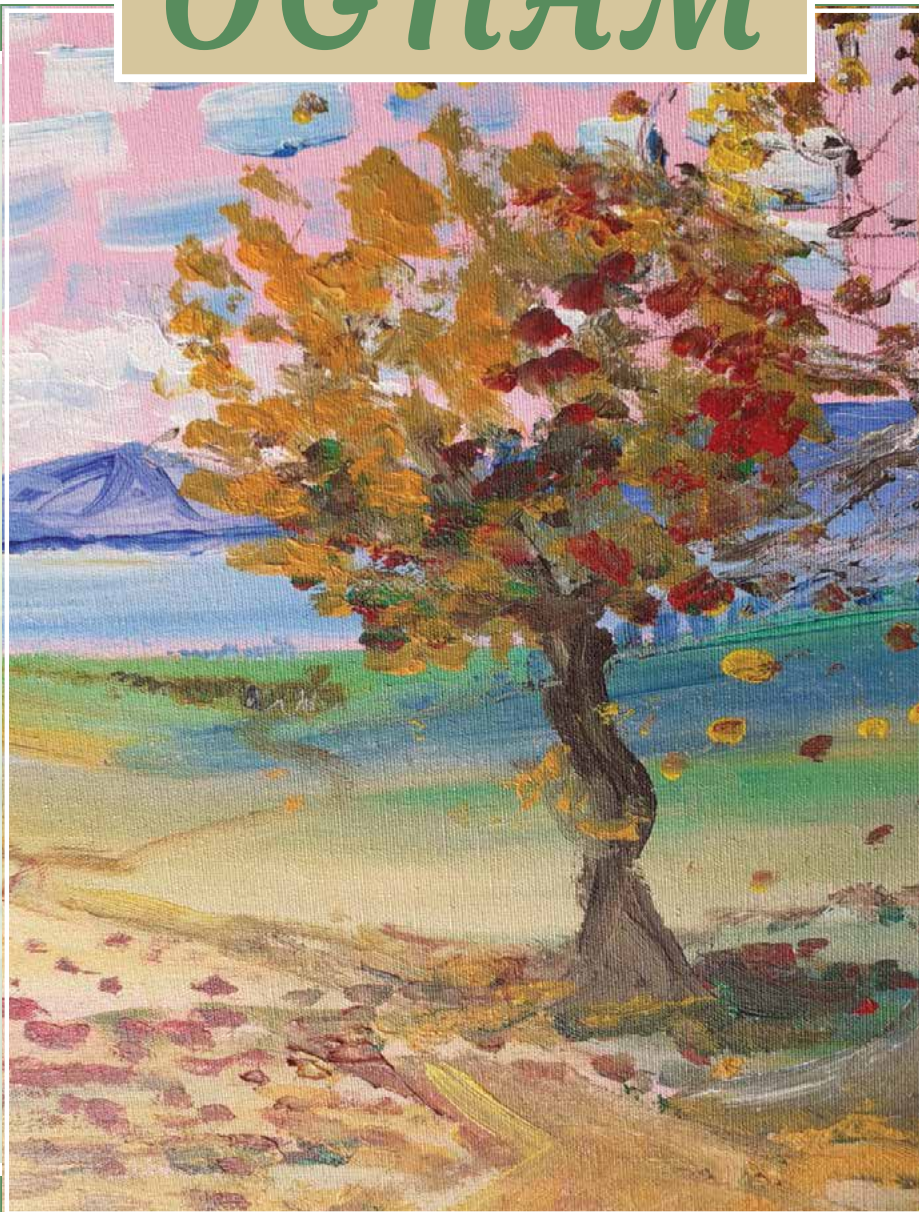


# ОСНАМ



The Healing Language Of The Trees

Introduction.....	2
1 - Beithe / Birch.....	3
2 - Luis / Rowan.....	5
3 - Fearnóg / Alder.....	7
4 - Saileach / Willow.....	9
5 - Nion / Ash.....	11
6 - Huath / Hawthorn.....	13
7 - Tinne / Holly.....	15
8 - Dair / Oak .....	17
9 - Coll / Hazel.....	19
10 - Queirt / Apple.....	21
11 - Muin / Vine / Bramble .....	23
12 - Gort / Ivy .....	25
13 - Ngetal / Broom.....	27
14 - Sraibh / Blackthorn .....	29
15 - Ruis / Elder.....	31
16 - Ailm / Fir.....	33
17 - Onn / Furze / Gorse .....	35
18 - Ur / Heather .....	37
19 - Eadhadh / Aspen.....	39
20 - Iúr/ The Yew Tree .....	41

Note: sometimes the names for trees are slightly different in Old Irish and current Irish.

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## Introduction

This brochure is designed to help you to identify 20 trees. The Birch tree is the first tree of Ogham. The Ogham language is the secret and magical language of the trees. It is a gift from our Celtic ancestors, the Druids.

These women and men were lawgivers, seers, philosophers, mediators, poets, and users of Ogham.

Every year, from September 1 to October 4, Christians around the world are praying and caring for creation.

This celebration is called the "Season of Creation".

Pope Francis reminds us in his Encyclical letter called *Laudato Si'*, that we have "Our Common Home" to care for, namely our earth.

Saint Francis (1181-1226) spoke lovingly about the earth as "Our Sister, our Mother, who sustains and governs us".

May this brochure assist you in knowing more about our native trees and start you off on the exciting journey of being a guardian of the Earth, a planter of trees, and perhaps even as a custodian of forests.

We take the opportunity to thank all our sponsors, who made this publication possible.

The Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Committee-JPICC- in Donegal, September 2021.

**A big thank you to all our sponsors and donors.**



**Diocese of Raphoe**  
**Deoise Ráth Bhoth**

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## 1. *Beithe* - The Birch Tree

The first symbol of the Ogham language is that of the birch tree, the Tree of Life.

In autumn, the wind scatters the fragile leaves of birch far and wide. Falling to earth, their dying leaves turn into a rich, fertile compost. This provides a rich soil for other trees, such as oak, hazel, willow, and ash to grow. These soon grow taller than the birch and cast it into deep shadow. Deprived of light, the birch tree gradually dies.

The birch grows all over Europe and further north. Its bark was extensively used in building currachs and canoes. Its twigs for thatching, brooms, and wattles. Its inner bark for cloth and writing paper.

Life abounds in a birch wood. Birds feed on its seeds and caterpillars eat its leaves. Heather and bilberry flourish on the acid rich soil it prefers. Its light shadow encourages grasses and wildflowers to grow. Various fungi sprout from dead birch trunks.

The birch has many medicinal uses. Birch tea, made by steeping a few leaves in boiling water, alleviates those suffering from arthritis and rheumatism. As a diuretic it breaks down and eliminates painful kidney and bladder stones and clears infections in these areas. A birch mouthwash will help those suffering from mouth ulcers and prevents tooth decay. It is a powerful antiseptic.

Birch sap is a natural shampoo, and birch oil from the bark acts as an insect repellent.

The birch is a true pioneer, breaking new ground and fertilizing often barren soil. In so doing, it sacrifices itself for others. That is why our ancestors referred to it as the Tree of Life.

*Task: Identify the closest Birch tree to your home. Can you identify everything of the Birch tree: its bark, its flowers, its leaves and all the insects which like to visit the Birch?*





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## 2. Luis - The Rowan

The second symbol of the Ogham language is that of the Rowan tree, the “Tree of Resilience”.

Sometimes it is known as the ‘quicken’ tree or the mountain ash. Tall and slender, it grows high up on barren rocky slopes, clinging precariously for dear life to fissures and cracks in boulders. In May it is easily identified with its clusters of creamy blossoms, which in August become bright scarlet berries.

These berries, rich in vitamin C, are best cooked and made into a delicious jelly. Do not eat raw! In early days, this jelly was used as a cure for scurvy, especially for sailors. The berries are a favourite food of birds, especially for the Starlings.

The Rowan was widely planted by our ancestors to ward off evil spirits. Its yellowish wood is sturdy and flexible and is made into tool handles and carvings and can be a substitute for yew in longbows. Celtic legends abound with stories linked to the rowan. The druids made wands and magical weapons from its branches, and beds known as the ‘wattles of knowledge’ for their ceremonies. A poem from the Duanaire Finn called “the Rowan Tree of Clonfert” mentions a large assembly of the Fianna under a Rowan tree. In the pursuit of Diarmaid and Grainne, the two lovers hide in a Rowan tree grown from a berry brought from the Land of Promise. The Rowan is also linked to Daghdha, the Celtic Lord of the Hunt.

Clinging to barren rocky slopes, the Rowan tree is a symbol of resilience. It has a great zest to live and bear fruit in often harsh climates. Its bright red berries remind us of the light the brughaidh, the hostel keeper, who kept burning it all night to welcome strangers and travellers to the community, in compliance with the Brehon Laws.

Task: Identify the leaves, bark, blossoms (May) and berries (August) of the Rowan tree. What is the colour of each?  
Find a recipe for the delicious jelly of the berries.





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### 3. *Fearnóg* - The Alder

The alder tree has grown in Ireland for many thousands of years. Its bark is rough, the leaves round. In autumn it bears male and female catkins. It can be easily found on wetlands and riverbanks and its roots help to hold the earth together, binding nitrogen and enriching the soil.

A distillation of the bark is useful to bathe swellings and inflammations, especially of the throat. A covering of bags filled with heated leaves is said to be a cure for rheumatism. The leaves, freshly picked, are an excellent insect repellent, and fleas cannot stand their smell.

When first cut, the wood appears to be the colour of blood, later seasoning to a bright yellow. Black, red, yellow, cinnamon, and green dyes are made from the bark, shoots, catkins, and leaves. Alder wood is used to make furniture, cart and spinning wheels, bowls, spoons, and clogs. It endures many years under water, making it ideal for the construction of jetties and *crannógs*, which require deeply sunk and rot resistant piles.

The shields of the Red Branch Knights (*An Craobh Ruadh*), the guardians of Ulster, were made of woven alder branches. This was due to the toughness of its easily worked branches and their reddish colour when first cut.

However, for these Celtic warriors, it was not only the wooden shields which protected them from all harm, but the spirit of the alder itself. Their shields could be used only in defence. If used as an offensive weapon they lost their protective quality. The Irish name for this protecting shield of the alder is *sciath dín*.

Task: When you have identified the Alder tree, try to find the old female strobiles (cone-like and brown); new female catkins (small and upright, greenish) and male catkins (long, greenish yellow). Then share this find with your family, friends, and classmates.





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## 4. *Saileach* – The Willow Tree

There are several varieties of the willow tree. The most easily identified are the Weeping Willow, the Sally Willow, and the Osier. Willows normally grow along riverbanks and can reach a height of 20 metres. Its leaves are long and slender. The long yellow male catkins and the green female catkins appear in early spring but on separate trees. The grey bark is smooth or heavily ridged.

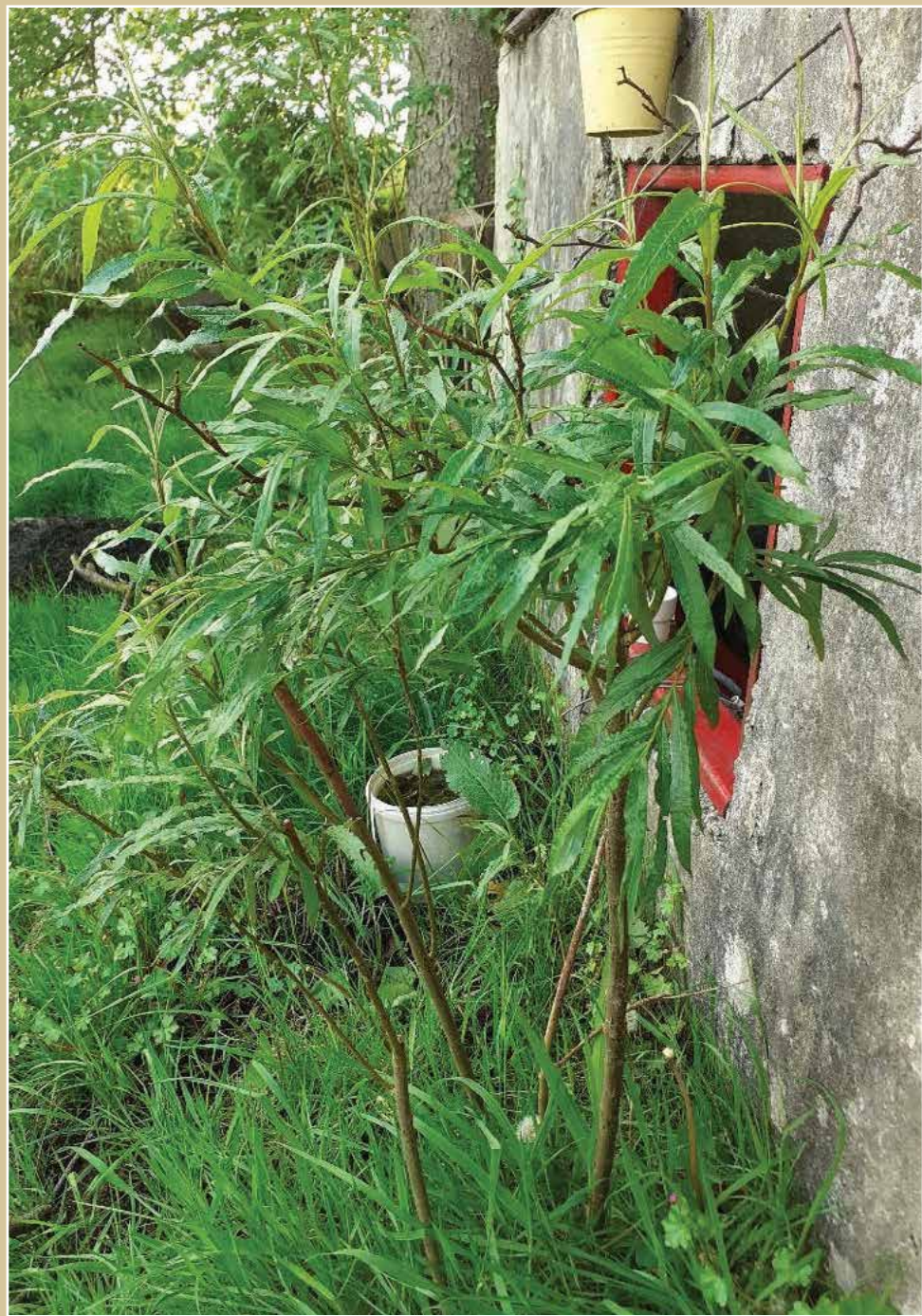
The leaves, bark and wood can all be used for medicinal purposes. The bark is a source of aspirin. A weak solution of the sap or crushed leaves makes a good gargle to alleviate nasal catarrh. The crushed leaves also make a good shampoo, especially against dandruff. They also act as a styptic to stop minor bleeding.

The wood of the willow has many uses. If the osier is cut down close to the ground it produces a mass of long flexible straight stems. This is called coppicing. When the top of the maturing tree is cut off it produces thin strong rods. This is referred to as pollarding. Our ancestors used both techniques to harvest the willow crop. The long thin stems are used to make fences and can be woven into baskets, creels, and lobster pots. Our ancestors built their homes of wattles and clay. They made parallel walls of woven willow rods and filled the space between the inner and outer walls with earth. This created strong wind and rain resistant walls and provided excellent insulation. The charred wood of willow was a favourite of artists. The stems are still used to provide a strong foundation in the building of a coracle (*curach*).

The willows preference for fords and riverbanks reminds us of the ‘thin’ or ‘in between’ places so abundant in Irish legends, where battles, magical events and important decisions often took place.

*Task: Could you try to find one of these legends or magical events?*







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## 5. *Nion* - The Ash Tree

The Ash is the only native tree of the Olive tribe: *Oleaceae*. The trunk is long and straight. The grey bark is smooth in the beginning but becomes rugged and fissured as the tree ages. It has distinctive black flower buds and its seeds, known as 'ash keys' grow in bunches. Each 'key' has a long thin wing. It is one of the last native trees to come into leaf, and the leaves are lance shaped.

Both bark and leaves have medicinal uses. The bark has been employed as a bitter tonic and astringent, and a decoction was used to treat intermittent fever. The sap and juice from the leaves is useful to remove stones in the bladder. The leaves act as a laxative, especially in the treatment of gout and rheumatism. Ash keys are preserved in salt and vinegar and used as capers in sauces and salads.

The wood of the ash is heavy, strong, and stiff, yet it is the toughest and most elastic of our timbers. In earlier days it was used to make spears and bows, and is still used to make hurly sticks, garden tool handles, oars, walking sticks and the beams used in weaving. As fire-wood, it burns wet or dry, gives a great heat and is smokeless.

The Celts used ash for their preferred weapon – the spear. Long and straight, its tip was hardened in the fire. A staff of 1.80 cm made a jabbing spear while a staff of 90 cm made a throwing spear. *Ga bulga*, the gapped spear, was the favourite weapon of Cuchulainn. The important Celtic deity, Lugh of the Long Arm, probably got his exotic name from his famous spear. It gave his arm a longer reach! The magical ash wand of the Druid signified his or her will.

Task: find out all you can about  
Cuchulainn or Lugh of the Long Arm.



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## 6. *Huath* - The Hawthorn Tree

The Hawthorn is also known as the whitethorn, for the whiteness of its bark, quick thorn, for its quick growth and as May blossom. In May it has a profusion of small white flowers which turn to bright red berries or haws. It can grow to a height of 15 metres but is usually cut back to form low thorny hedges, a favourite of farmers to divide their plots. The leaves are lobed and are not unlike small oak leaves.

The leaves make a tasty tea, a good tonic for the heart and for those who have circulatory problems. Both berries and flowers are astringent and useful in decoction to cure sore throats. It is a good diuretic for those with kidney problems. The decoction is made from the juice of the berries.

The wood of the root was used for making boxes and combs and takes a high polish. It makes excellent fuel but its use as firewood was frowned upon by the Celts. They considered it unlucky to bring hawthorn into the house. It was associated with the *Sidhe* as it is often found growing on fairy mounds. It is believed *Sidhe* planted them there as a warning to humans not to disturb or damage their homes, or else! Christians regarded the tree as sacred. They believed that hawthorn branches were woven into the Crown of Thorns. A variety of hawthorn with larger berries is common around Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives, where its fruit is made into preserves.

The thick hawthorn hedges provide protection and defence for the small birds and animals which make their nests deep in its tangled branches. It provides them not only with food but also a haven. The druids often used its sharp thorns in their rituals to create satires, gathering round a hawthorn tree and chanting incantations.

Task: In Spring time, appreciate the blossoms and in the Autumn identify the birds which like to feed on the berries.





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## 7. Tinne – The Holly Tree

The Holly is easily identified by its glossy evergreen leaves with thorns and red berries. Male and female trees bear small flowers, but only the female tree will have berries. It has smooth grey bark. It is often found as an understudy and defensive barrier for the oak.

The wood of the Holly is white, hard, and compact. It is especially useful in carving, marquetry and furniture making, as it takes a high polish. A straight branch makes an ideal walking stick. It was one of the three woods used in ancient chariot wheels and was used exclusively for the shafts. In the Irish legend, the 'Cattle Raid of Cooley', we learn about its use in chariots and as a weapon. Warriors made spears of straight branches of Holly, sharpened at the tip in a charcoal fire.

Tea made from the leaves will induce sweating, lower fevers and rids the body of toxins. The attractive red berries, though eaten by thrushes and blackbirds, can be harmful to adults, and especially children! The berries are a powerful emetic and purgative and can cause vomiting. Deer and sheep feed in winter on the leaves. Young stems, dried and crushed, are given as fodder to cows and are said to improve their milk and butter. A Holly stick given to rabbits to gnaw on acts as a tonic and improves their appetite.

Holly was also referred to in earlier times as the 'Holy Tree'. An old legend recounts that it first grew under the footsteps of Christ – 'thorns and not berries were strewn under the sod'. Its thorny leaves and red berries reminded Christians of 'His drops of Blood on the Way of the Cross', which is why Christian churches are often decked with Holly at Christmas. The Cross overshadowed the Crib. Our Druids would decorate their huts with Holly during winter as a welcome for the spirits of the green world.

*Task: Make a drawing of a few leaves of the Holly and appreciate all its lovely forms.*







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## 8. *Dair* – The Oak Tree

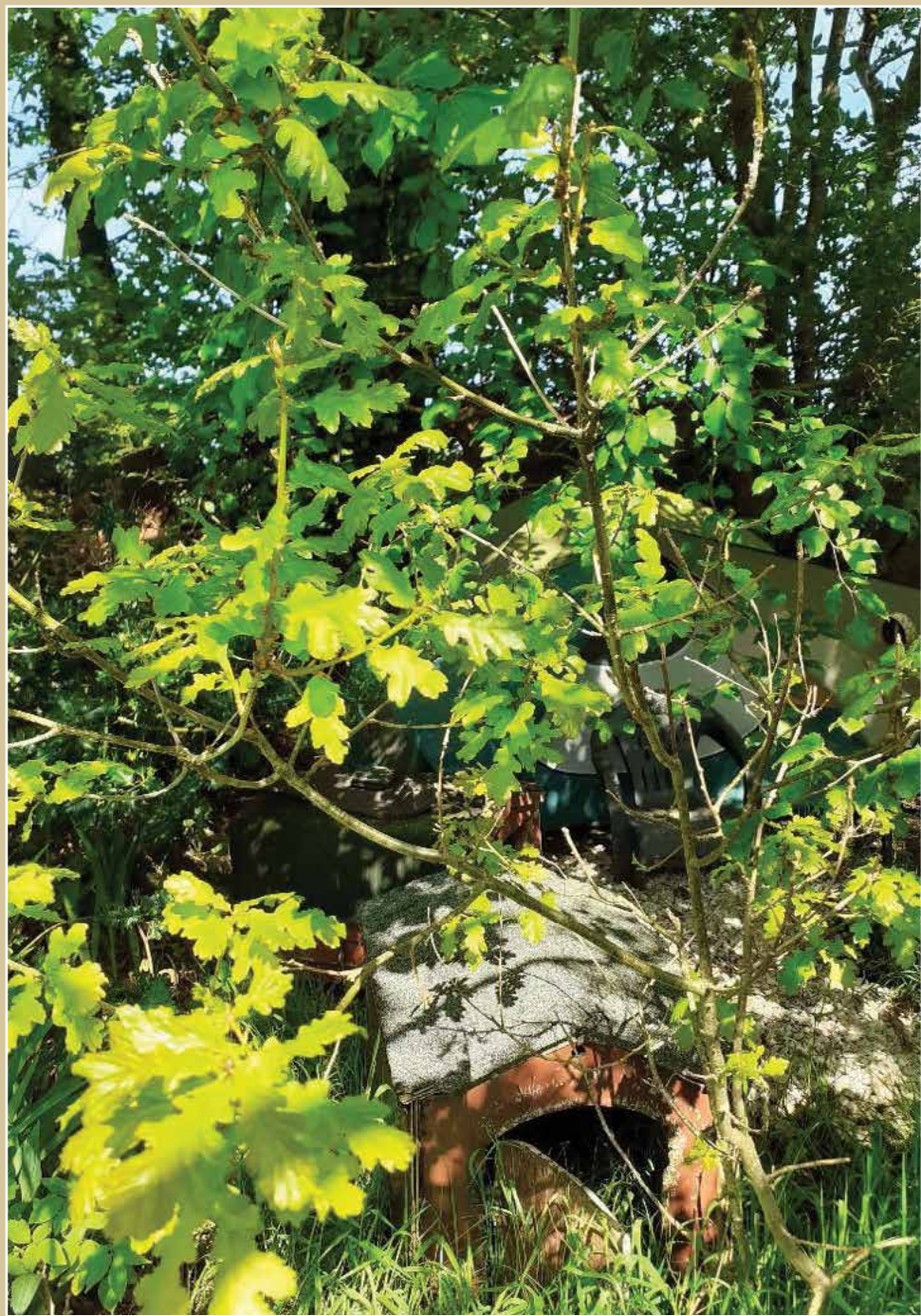
There are several varieties of Oak, but the ones we are most familiar with, are easily recognizable with their deeply lobed leaves. Young trees have light grey bark, while in more mature trees the bark becomes fissured and rough. In May it bears small female flowers and long yellow male catkins. Acorns are the familiar fruit of the Oak and it takes almost 80 years before producing acorns. These provide food for wild and domestic animals, and the tree itself provides a home for birds, animals, and insects. The Oak lives to a ripe old age, between 1000 and 2000 years.

The wood of the Oak is hardy and tough, elastic, and strong, making it an ideal timber for shipbuilding and furniture. The bark, stripped in April and May, is still used to tan leather. Scottish Highlanders used Oak sap mixed with copperas to dye their yarn a lasting purple. Black, brown, and yellow dyes mixed with alum, tin and zinc respectively are also obtained from the Oak bark.

The juice from crushed Oak leaves is a good antiseptic for wounds, and a gargle can be made from the inner bark to alleviate chronic sore throats, catarrh, and bleeding gums. It is also useful in the treatment of chronic diarrhoea, dysentery, and intermittent fever. A substitute for coffee can be made by shelling, boiling, and grinding acorns into flour or roasting.

The Oak is very much associated with the Druids, and the root of the word for Druid may mean Oak-knower. They used Oak groves as sacred places for their rituals and other religious ceremonies. In earlier times Kildare and Derry were massive Oak forests. The word *dair* also has a secondary meaning which is 'chief' and was linked to the role of the High King, as protector and defender of the people. The famous 'Oak of Mamre', also called Abraham's Oak, was believed to be the tree grew under which Abraham and Sarah pitched their tent.

Task: How many places or names can you find with the word 'dair'?



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## 9. Coll - The Hazel Tree

The Hazel is a small tree which can grow to about 6 metres. The leaves are round or oval, pointed and heart-shaped at the base. It is easily recognized at any time of the year. In winter by its yellow brown twigs and green buds; in spring by its yellow catkins and in summer by its distinctive leaves. In autumn clusters of 1 to 4 nuts appear, gradually turning brown, fringed by frilly bracts. It takes 9 years for a hazel tree to bear fruit.

Like the Willow it is often coppiced, its branches cut down close to the ground. In spring this produces long flexible straight stems, used to produce wattles, hurdles, basketry and tightly woven fences and walls. Dowsers use a forked branch of the hazel in their search for water and other minerals. Hazel wands are a favourite of druids for casting spells. The Greeks used fresh bark from the Hazel tree to write on and create a document. The word 'protocol' is derived from the Greek word for first – *pro'tos* and *kolla* – glue.

Hazel nuts are edible and rich in nutritious minerals. Ground into powder and mixed with drink the concoction alleviates sore throats and the symptoms of head colds. Druids during their ritual ceremonies are said to have chewed hazelnuts to gain inspiration and knowledge.

Brigid a deity of the *Tuatha de Danaan*, renowned for her wisdom and divine inspiration, is linked to the Hazel tree. According to ancient legends, Hazel nuts contain all wisdom. This Brigid is often confused with St. Brigid of Kildare. The ancient Celtic feast of *Imbolg*, associated with Brigid the Celtic deity and heralding the coming of Spring, was adopted by the Christian church. It was renamed "Eve of the Festival of Brigid" or as *Gaeilge* : *Oiche Fheil Brighide*, and celebrated on February 1st.

Task: Do you know the poem "I went out to the hazel wood,  
because a fire was in my head"? Who wrote it? Can you recite it?





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## 10. *Queirt* - The Apple Tree

All the 2000 plus varieties of Apple trees owe their existence to the Crab Apple. It is a small native tree, and rarely grows more than 10 metres high. It has scaly bark, round or oval leaves and large pink or white blossoms. It is mainly found in or near Oak woods. The apples are small and red or yellow when ripe. The fruit is bitter but rich in pectin which makes it ideal as a setting agent for jams and jellies. It is the first apple tree to blossom and has a rich aroma and bountiful store of nectar. All this attracts the hungry bees in their thousands and in return they help pollinate all other trees and crops.

Apples are very medicinal. They are especially good for people who sit a lot. They alleviate problems of the liver, of gout and indigestion. Apple juice is effective in digesting other foods. Eaten, skin and all, it quickly provides energy and warmth. Ripe apples, preferably sour, eaten at bedtime will cure constipation, and may cure sleepiness. A raw apple cleanses your teeth and pushes back the gums to cleanse them of harmful food deposits.

*Emhain Abhlach*, which means a “place of many apple trees”, has often been identified with the Isle of Arran, of the coast of Scotland. Our ancestors believed that it was an Other-world paradise. Brave souls had to be prepared to make many sacrifices, face trials and hardship to travel there and back to seek aid for their people. They travelled there bearing an apple branch which was a sign of good will and their key to entering the sacred isle.

Task: An Apple tree is easy to plant. Plant the entire apple in the autumn in a pot of soil. Leave outside all winter where it hibernates. In Spring the Sun will warm the soil and the apple seed awakens. Keep moist.







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## 11. *Muin*: The Vine, or in its place: the Bramble

The twining nature of the vine with its large lobed leaves and small light green blossoms is a familiar sight in many countries. Many years ago, the climate in Ireland was warmer than today and vines grew well, especially in the south of the country. Some still flourish there today or in greenhouses. As the weather became colder and the vines scarce, the Druids often substituted the bramble for the vine. Like the vine, the blackberries of the bramble also produce a rich wine.

Ripe grapes are an excellent tonic, especially for people who suffer from anaemia or exhaustion. Taken in quantity they produce a free flow of urine. The leaves have as many nutritious minerals and salts as the grapes and a decoction of the leaves helps rid kidneys and bladders of painful stones. Raisins, the dried fruit of the grapes are nutritive, soothing for the stomach and slightly laxative. Burned ashes from the branches makes a good stain removing toothpaste.

Wine and brandy are produced from the ripe grapes and taken in moderation calm nerves, give comfort and aid digestion. The vine is a very long-lived tree and in France some are 400 years old or more! Planks up to 38 centimetres have been obtained from old vines and the wood is very durable. The long, strong roots of the vine can be twisted and plaited into twine and rope.

*Muin*, which can mean vine, bramble, or thorn tree, is linked to the word for teacher – *múinteoir*. By studying the vine and its properties we gain especially useful knowledge. The long winding branches of the vine cannot support their own weight, so they will always attach themselves to a host tree or other supports. It works hard to twine itself up and around the tree, then it can rest, in harmony with its chosen tree. It is also capable of reaching out and uniting various trees.

*Task: Write down in what way a Múinteoir reaches out and unites people.*



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## 12. Gort – The Ivy Tree

Ivy is a familiar evergreen climber with dark green glossy leaves. It climbs using thin tendrils with small disks at the end which attach themselves to the bark of a tree, wall, or other support. These tendrils can enter deep crevices in a wall or bark of a tree. Once inside they grow as roots and can bring down the wall or kill the tree. Ivy only produces yellowish green flowers when its branches reach higher than its support.

The ivy flowers at the end of October until late December. The flowers yield abundant nectar and are a vital source of food for bees in late autumn when other sources of nectar become scarce. Its black or deep purple berries provide welcome food for woodpigeons, blackbirds, thrushes, and other birds when they ripen the following Spring. The broad leaves afford shelter to birds and many build their nests in its thick clusters.

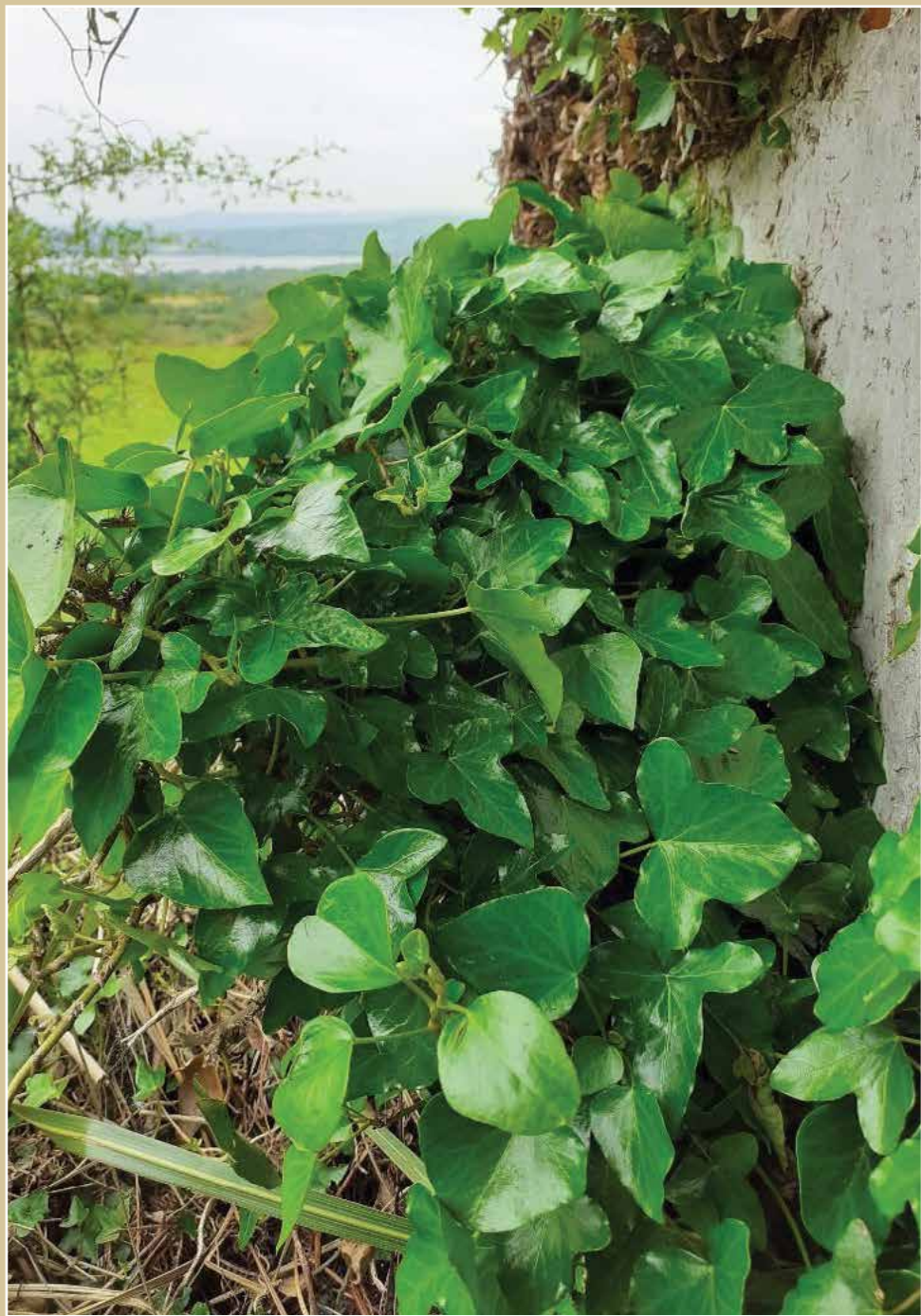
Ivy lives to a great age and trunks of over 30 centimetres in diameter are common where it has grown undisturbed. The wood is soft but is still used by turners for carpentry.

People should avoid using the ivy for medicinal purposes as there exists the risk of poisoning, especially from its berries!

For the Druids, the ivy was interchangeable with the honeysuckle. Unlike the Ivy, the Honeysuckle does not kill the tree. They considered the Ivy as a powerful tree for its ability to bring down even the strongest oak tree in the forest. It spreads not only over neighbouring trees but also over the earth, creating a thick and impenetrable green wall. On the *Ogham* stem of the *Ogham* writing, the Ivy has two notches, double the strength of the Vine, which has one notch.

Task: Try to detect where you have seen Ivy growing nearest to your home.





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### 13. - *nGetal* – The Broom Tree

The Broom, with its bright yellow flowers, can grow to a height of 150 centimetres. It blooms from April to July and provides abundant pollen for the bees. Its branches are long, straight, and flexible. It should not be confused with the Gorse, which is similar. Broom does not have the long sharp spines of the Gorse.

In earlier days it was used with great care as a diuretic and purgative medicine to break down stones in the bladder and kidneys. Oil drawn from heating the branches relieved toothache. Once boiled and cooled it cleansed the head and skin of lice and other parasites.

The long flexible stems make ideal brooms for sweeping floors, thatching, and weaving baskets. Cabinet makers use the mature stems for veneering because of the attractive veins and hardy wood. Macerated in water like flax the strong fibres can be used to make paper and cloth. The leaves and young tops produce green dye, and the seeds can be used as a substitute for coffee beans.

The Travelling People of Ireland, Scotland and other countries in Europe stay within the same place during the winter months. Once the Broom tree begins to flower, they begin their travelling once again as the weather becomes warmer. The Broom, like the Birch, heralds a time of new beginnings.

The Broom is essentially a 'cleansing' tree. It sweeps and clears away anything damaging to the person and their surroundings. The Druids also used it for mental and spiritual hygiene, as an aid to sweeping away negative thoughts, images, feelings, and emotions which they allowed to build up in their minds and their spirits.

*Task: Carefully take some branches of the Broom, without damaging it, and make something creative with it. For example: a little basket or anything that comes to your mind. When you are happy with it, put it on a place of honour and enjoy it.*







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## 14. *Sraibh* – The Blackthorn Tree

Blackthorn is normally found in hedges but if allowed to grow it can become a tree of almost 4 metres high. It is easily recognized by its black thorny shoots and in early spring by its clusters of small white flowers, which appear before the leaves in late March or early April. From late August to October, it bears blue black plums, called sloes. It is a favourite place for birds to build their nests.

The fruit can be made into jam and sloe gin. It has a very bitter taste but can stop both external and internal bleeding. Its leaves can be boiled into a decoction and, once cool, is a good mouth wash and gargle to alleviate the soreness of tonsillitis and laryngitis. A tea made from the powdered bark will soothe distraught nerves. Sloe juice can be used as ink but will cause a stain on clothes, difficult to remove.

The bark is rough and bright orange just under the surface. The wood is used in marquetry and in the making of walking sticks, such as the *shillelagh*. Cattle drovers, matchmakers and musicians all made good use of the *shillelagh*, as did the Druids for their arsenal of wands.

Task: Look out for a branch on a Blackthorn tree, which would make a good shillelagh. Try to make one yourself and check with your art teacher how you are getting on.



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## 15. Ruiz – The Elder Tree

The Elder can grow up to 10 metres in height. It has pinnate oval or round shaped leaves, and in June clusters of small creamy white blossoms. In late August and September, it is laden with black berries on red stalks.

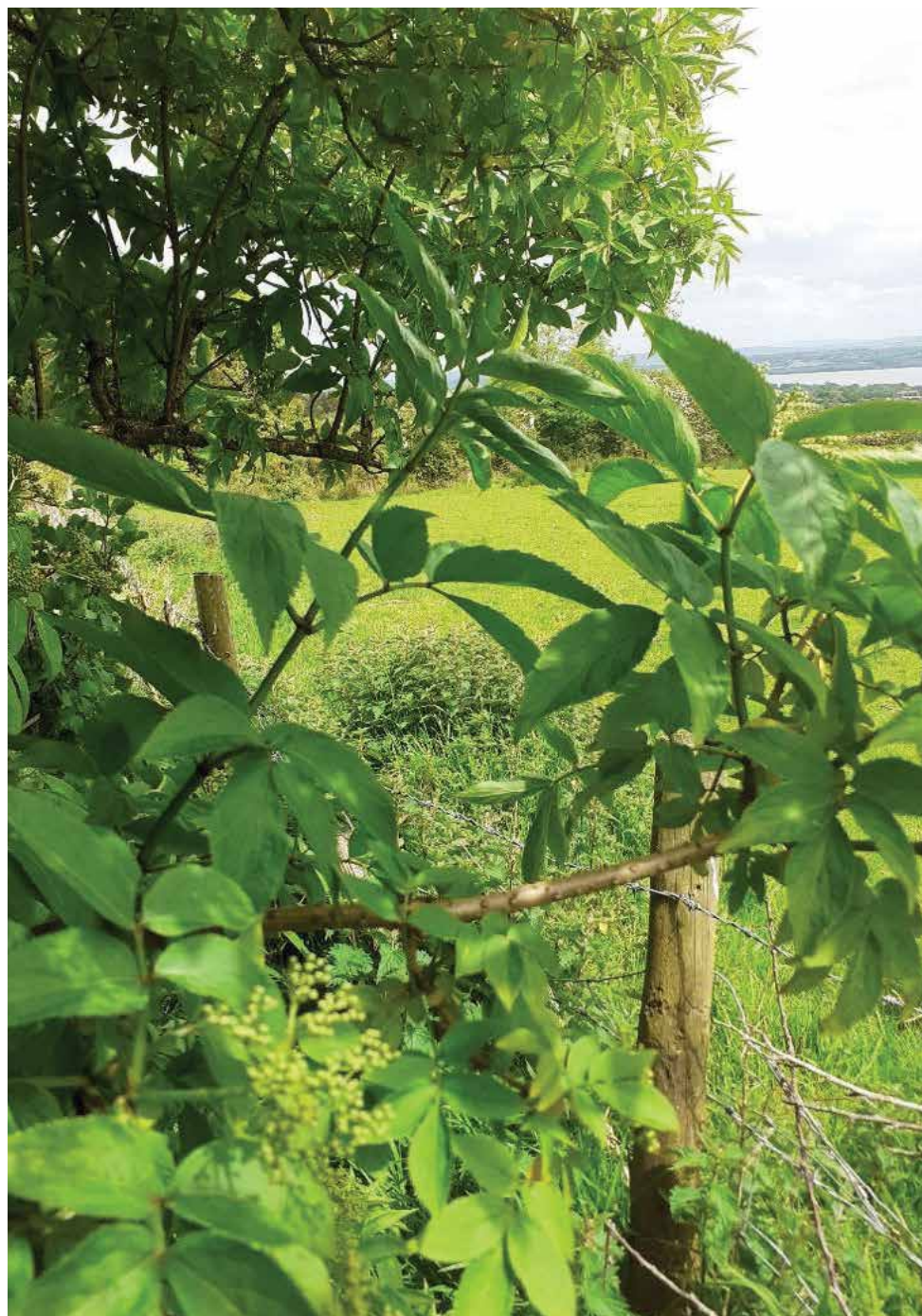
The berries and leaves of the Elder are rich in vitamin C, and combined with tea made from the flowers, is an excellent protection against colds, flu, and irritating coughs. The berries especially are a strong anti-viral. Hot Elderflower tea will provoke sweat and help break a fever. The leaves can be used either fresh or dry. A distillation made from the flowers, will cleanse the skin, alleviate headaches, and provide an excellent tonic for the blood. The bark properly prepared works as a purgative. A nutritious wine is made from the berries.

The bark provides a strong black dye, the leaves a rich green and the flowers lilac or blue dyes. The Romans used Elderberry juice as a hair dye. Celtic women used a facial wash of the flowers which stimulates, strengthens, and protects the fine veins under the skin, improves circulation and reduces crow's feet and wrinkles.

The soft pith of Elder branches is easily pushed out and the hollow stems have been long used as pipes, musical flutes and by children as popguns and peashooters. The wood of mature Elder trees is white and of a close-cut grain. It is easily cut. It polishes well and was used in making skewers for butchers, pegs for shoemakers', tops for fishing rods, needles for weaving nets and small toys. It creates a good long-lasting fence and if clipped two or three times during the year makes a compact hedge.

*Task: Take 3 pots for planting and fill them with good earth.  
Then take 9 small branches and place 3 branches in each pot.  
Put the pots on a windowsill, where you can watch them and see them  
grow. Plant out, when growing well.*





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## 16. *Ailm* – The Fir Tree

The name Fir as used in Ogham refers to Scots Pine. It is the only native species in these islands which would have been known to the Celts. It can grow to a height of 30 metres. The upper part of the trunk ranges from rusty brown to orange, while the lower part is covered in a deeply fissured bark. The evergreen needles are bluish grey. The male pinecones form a yellow cluster around the young shoots in May but soon fall to the earth. The female cones are initially green but gradually mature until they turn greyish brown.

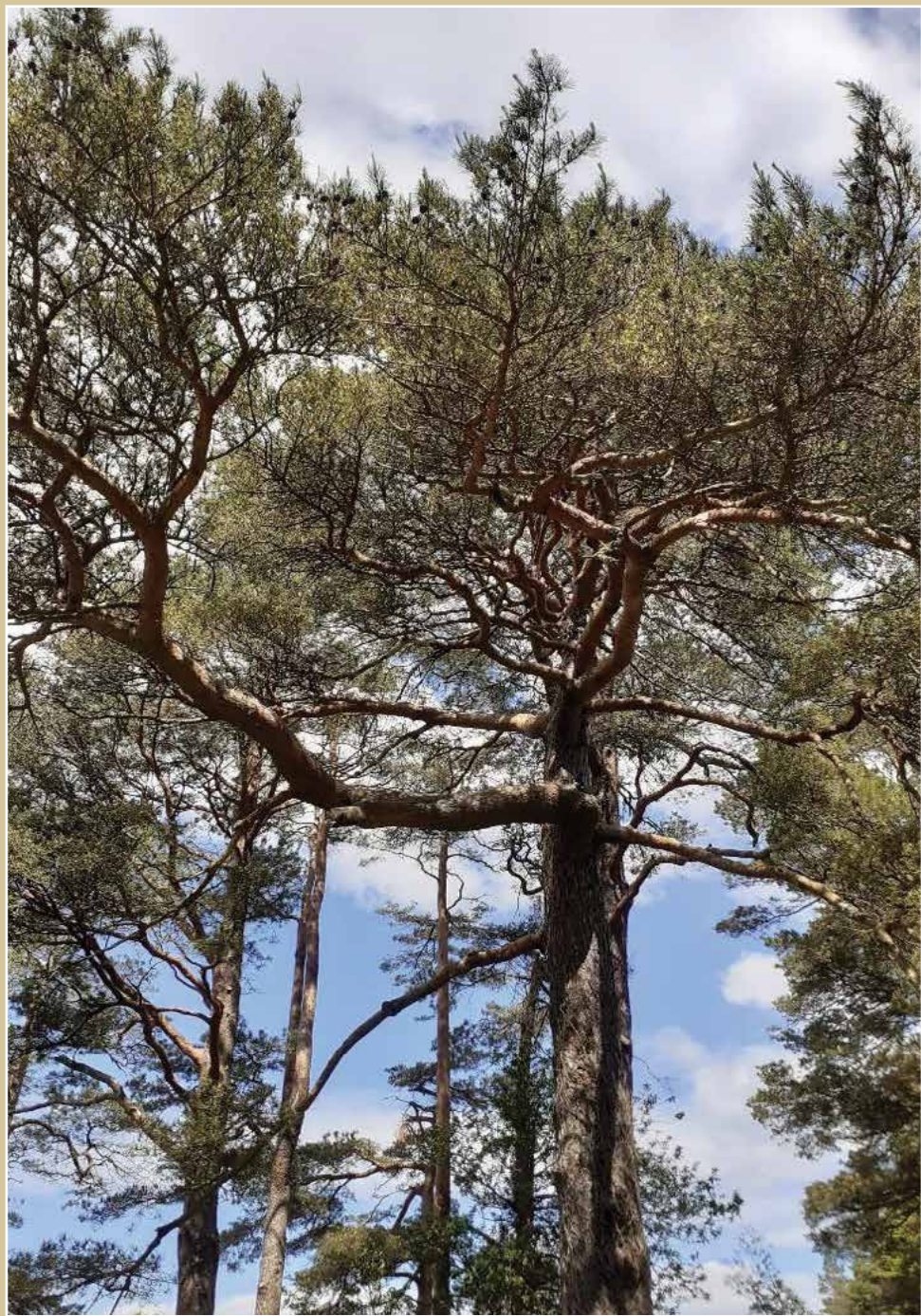
The inner bark of the pine is rich in vitamin C, edible and nutritious, best in the Spring. Choose bark from near the bottom of the tree or exposed roots. Peel back with a knife to reveal the inner layer. This has a slightly sweet taste and can be eaten raw. However, it is more digestible if well boiled, until it turns into a glutinous mass. It can then be roasted and ground for use as flour. Steep some fresh green needles in boiling water for a few minutes. This tea will be rich in Vitamin C. Inhale the warm vapours to alleviate blocked sinuses and noses. You can also chew the tender green needles when they appear in Spring to obtain vitamin C directly. It was an old cure for scurvy. The tea will also protect against bladder and kidney infections. It is very antiseptic. Always do this under supervision of an adult.

Because of its straight grain, strength, and other qualities it is used extensively in construction work. It also provides turpentine, resin, tar, and is a good source of charcoal.

Druidic physicians encouraged a walk in a pine forest to improve breathing and to rid the lungs of cold and flu toxins. It also boosts the immune system. Today this is referred to as 'forest bathing'.

*Task: Invite your family for a Forest walk and "Forest Bath".*







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## 17. Onn – The Furze Tree

The Furze is also known as Gorse or Whin. In Ireland we have two species of Gorse or Whin, as it is more commonly known. The Dwarf Gorse, 'aiteann Gaedhealach' and the European gorse, 'aiteann Gallda nó Franncach'. The Dwarf Gorse is native to Ireland while the former is foreign. Both are distinguished by spiny branches and bright yellow flowers, but the flowers of the Dwarf gorse have more of an orange tint and its spines are curved backwards. These flower from August to November, while the European variety begins to flower in December and by March or April is in full bloom. It is a favourite of bees as it has abundant nectar and pollen. It continues sometimes to late June and can be found sporadically all year round. The flowers exude a powerful scent like the aroma of fresh coconut. European Gorse can attain a height of 1.80 metres, the Dwarf nearly always much less. Like broom it grows well by the sea.

Druidic physicians favoured the native Dwarf gorse, as trees and plants which are smaller invariably have greater healing qualities. Honey from this gorse is even today considered a healing honey, and the Druids used it as an anti-bacterial to heal wounds, especially 'green wounds' inflicted in battles. The wood of the Gorse will quickly catch fire and dried Furze was often used for kindling turf. It also marked the boundaries of fields. For the farmers, early flowering Gorse meant that the fields could be worked early. If this were followed by a long and continuous period of bloom, the farmers could look forward to a good harvest. They knew that the bees would be bountiful and busy pollinating all the crops. Most cottages had a large Gorse bush nearby in the garden, ideal for drying clothes.

*Task: Consider yourself a warden of nature, the one who protects plants, birds, bees, insects, and trees. Never set Gorse on fire.*



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## 18. *Ur* – The Heather Tree

Heather is the dominant plant on upland heath, moor-land, and bogs. Its small fragrant flowers are red and purplish, sometimes white. The stems are tough and woody with small opposite leaves. It flourishes on acid soil and flowers from July to September. The Celts called this Heather filled heath and bog 'Ur'. 'Ur' means anything fresh, green, and renewable, an apt name for the abundance of Heather and numerous flowers that attracted bees, insects, and birds. Many years ago, receding ice glaciers passing over the rocks scoured them deeply, leaving a sandy mixture. Centuries later fallen forests, mostly of Oak, slowly decomposed. Their humus mixed in with the sand gave rise to the bogs.

As a medicinal plant it is effective as a treatment for fraught nerves and heart disorders. Druidic physicians recommended long walks across bog and heath when the heather was in full bloom, especially after flu and bronchitis to clear and restore the lungs. They used dark red heather honey as medicine for sore throats and colds.

The long twisting roots and stems of heather are still used for thatching and to make ropes and brooms. Crafts people join polished stalks of heather to make badges, brooches, and other ornaments.

You do not need to be a weather forecaster to tell the weather if near bogland. It will be sunny if a mist rises from the bog heather. If there is no mist expect scattered showers!

*Task: Can you discover why many years ago the great forests of Ireland all fell?*





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## 19. *Eadhadh* – The Aspen Tree

The Aspen is one of the smallest poplars, rarely growing beyond 15 metres. It has silvery green bark which, as it matures, turns greyish brown. It is easily identified by its almost round leaves on long stalks. The male trees produce greyish catkins while the catkins of the female tree are green. In woods its yellow leaves are easily spotted at any time during autumn and winter.

Its medicinal properties are yet largely undiscovered, although its powdered bark mixed in liquid has been used to treat fever. It has also been used to get rid of worms and parasites in humans and animals. A leaf of aspen, crushed and held against a bee sting after removing its barb, will relieve the pain. The greenish layer under the bark is edible and tastes of watermelon.

Celtic warriors used the aspen as an alternative to Alder to make shields and spears.

An Aspen discovered a few years ago by botanists in the United States has a root mass of almost 81 hectares. This would make it one of the oldest living organisms in the world, almost 1.6 million years old!

Aspen serves as another tree guide to the weather. On their long stems, aspen leaves flutter in the breeze. If during the night, the leaves are heard to rustle, and rattle expect incoming showers. It was also given a nickname – *crancaire* – the grumbling tree, as it is quite noisy! If the leaves appear to flicker in the wind, showing their white undersides and the flickering grows more intense, a gale is on the way.

*Task: Make sure to distinguish the Birch from the Aspen.  
Look closely at how the leaves of the Aspen flutter in the wind.*







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## 20. *Iúr* - The Yew Tree

The evergreen yew tree can live to a ripe old age, even 4000 years or more. There are two kinds of Yew, the Irish Yew, and the Common Yew. Its leaves are flattened needles, dark green. The bark is reddish and flaky. Male and female flowers are borne on separate trees. The aril, which is like a red berry, contains a single seed. The fruit, leaves, bark, and sap of the yew are all poisonous, and must be handled with great care. It is not a very tall tree, growing to about 20 metres, but broad and squat.






















Celtic warriors preferred the wood of the Yew to make their longbows. Though flexible the branches of the Yew are very strong.

Of all the trees, the Yew was the most revered by the Druids, even more so than the mighty Oak. As the last tree in Ogham, it was said to contain the secrets of all the other trees. Groves of Yew were often considered sacred places of worship by the Druids. Irish Yews can still be seen in many monastic sites, church grounds and graveyards.

*Task: With a friend, visit the nearest graveyard and see whether you can find a Yew Tree there. Be careful with this tree as you know the leaves are poisonous. So preferably wear gloves.*



The *Ogham* alphabet is based on the first letter of 20 trees. Each letter has a symbol. To learn *Ogham*, we must climb the “tree” from the root upwards at the bottom of the page. The first letter is “B”, taken from the first tree *Beithe*, the first tree of a total of 20 trees. So, the writing is not from left to right, but from bottom to top. Names are in old Irish of the Book of Ballymote.

Symbol	Letter Irish		English	Number	My Name
	I	IDO	Yew	20	
	E	EDHADH	Aspen	19	
	U	UR	Heather	18	
	O	ONN	Furze	17	
	A	AILM	Fir	16	
	R	RUIS	Elder	15	
	St	SRAIBH	Blackthorn	14	
	nG	nGetal	Broom	13	
	G	GORT	Ivy	12	
	M	MUIN	Vine	11	
	Q	QUEIRT	Apple	10	
	C	COLL	Hazel	9	
	D	DAIR	Oak	8	
	T	TINNE	Holly	7	
	H	HUATH	Hawthorn	6	
	N	NION	Ash	5	
	S	SAILEACH	Willow	4	
	F	FEARNÓG	Alder	3	
	L	LUIS	Rowan	2	
	B	BEITHE	Birch	1	

Fun Exercise: Try to spell your own name in Ogham Script.  
There is space on the vertical line at the right-hand side.