

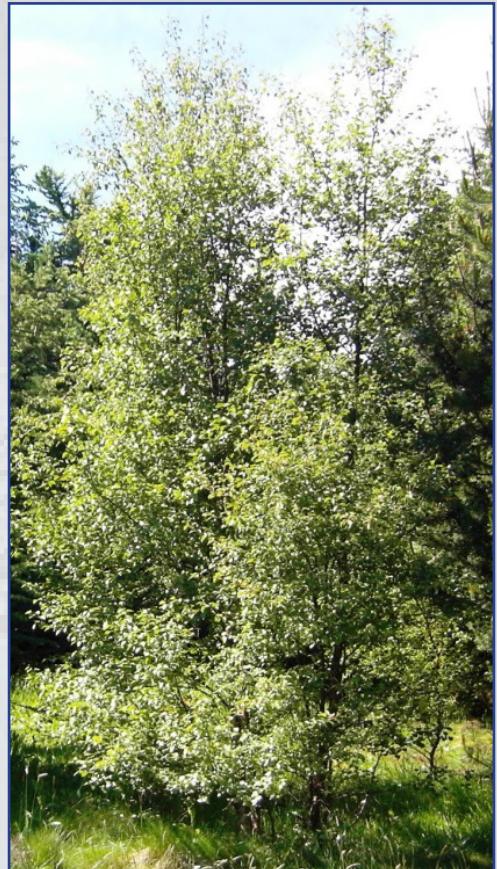
TREE MAGIC, MYTH, AND FACT

Trees have long been associated with magical powers, and feature in many mythologies and religions. There is also a mysterious 'tree alphabet' which has intrigued scholars, poets and druids alike, and offshoots of it appear in the Gaelic alphabet. Beith, the first letter of the tree alphabet, means Birch, and witches of course flew on broomsticks made of birch. The downy birch, which still survives in a few places in the wild in Shetland, is common in the more mountainous and northerly lands of Europe, and in Iceland.



Cryptomeria japonica at Kergord

Sacred trees and groves are found the world over. In Japan, the magnificent coniferous *Cryptomeria japonica* was planted at Shinto temples; in India the Buddha found enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree, a descendant of which still shades the site. Trees are commonly used in shamanistic rituals, as a ladder to ascend or descend to 'spirit worlds' and shamans have been active in all continents of the world.



Downy birch at Loch of Voe

An obvious example of a mythical tree imbued with magic is Yggdrasil, the tree central to old Norse cosmology. It is commonly thought to have been a huge ash tree linking the heavens, the gods, the underworld, and the world of humans, although references to it being evergreen may indicate it was a yew.



Yggdrasil – by Friedrich Wilhelm Heine (1888)



*The Fortingall Yew in 1822, Sylva Britannica 1822,
by Jacob George Strutt*

Yews are capable of living thousands of years and aged ones are often found in churchyards or in places that had pre-Christian spiritual significance. The Fortingall Yew in Perthshire is thought to be over 5,000 years old.

Ash anyway continued to have magical or curative properties: in the UK, sickly children, or those with rickets, used to be passed through a deliberately split tree. If the tree itself recovered its unity the child would likewise be restored to health.

This is interesting, not least because another species of ash, the Manna ash, has medicinal value - and a vernacular name linking it to the biblical Manna. And it is notable that in hard winters, rabbits are particularly fond of chewing off the bark of young ash trees, probably because of their high sugar content.

Two other peculiarities of ash are that a tree can in one year bear male flowers, and in another female flowers, and that its wood can be burned fresh.



Young ash at Kergord

It is sad that the ash is threatened by a new and virulent tree disease, for which modern society is partly responsible – but good that scientists are telling us not to rush out and cut down every tree – particularly those in ancient woodland – as some veterans may be resistant to the dieback that is afflicting trees in Europe and the UK.



*A fine wych elm in winter
at Helendale, Lerwick*

Another genus of trees that has suffered – massively – from disease is the elm. It is estimated that in the UK between the 1960s and 1990s, 25 million out of an estimated total of 30 million trees had died from Dutch Elm Disease (DED) – please note the Dutch did not cause this, but were the first to diagnose the deadly fungus and its vector (carrier), the elm bark beetle.

In Shetland we can grow the wych elm quite easily, and thankfully we are so far free of DED. ‘Wych’ is nothing to do with witches, but refers to its flexibility (from an Old English verb meaning ‘to give way’). Its stems and branches were used in former times for underground water pipes, and the wood has traditionally been used for coffins. The burrs that frequently form on the tree trunks make them a favourite for wood-turners.

Groves of elms have been regarded as sacred for millennia, and indeed were regarded as having links to the underworld. The English elm also has a reputation for suddenly shedding its branches on hot summer days, sometimes with fatal consequences.

It perhaps should give us cause for reflection that the mighty ash and elm, once so central to mythology, are both in or threatened by decline, with human economic activity being a factor. We do not relate much to trees these days except as a resource to be exploited; their veneration is often the subject of modern mainstream mockery. Nonetheless some continue to exercise our imagination.

Our native rowan is sometimes called mountain ash because it has a similar leaf structure to ash, but it is in a completely different plant (the rose) family. Nevertheless it has long had a magical reputation, and has often been planted near houses to ward off evil spirits or for good luck. Also it is reputed to be unlucky to cut down a rowan; my father used to point out that he had done this once in the garden, and the following day he and my mother were in a life-threatening car crash.



Sorbus aucuparia – our native rowan, laden with berries

The botanical name of rowan, *Sorbus aucuparia*, is intriguing: *aucuparia* is a corruption of the Latin *avis capere* – to catch a bird. Certainly its abundant clusters of orange-red berries, rich in Vitamin C, are rapidly stripped by birds in late summer. The berries can be made into a jelly, which is excellent for accompanying mutton or venison – it is recommended to add some apple to counter the rather bitter aftertaste.



*Linnaeus' memorial lime tree –
Voe House, Walls*

The use of 'warden trees' was common in Scandinavia, and the founder of modern botanical nomenclature, Linnaeus, or Carl von Linné, derived this name from a lime (linden) tree which stood as a *vårdträd* in his parents' farmyard.

Offerings were made to appease the 'wights' – mischievous spirits - who lived among the roots – perhaps a throwback to the Norse serpents who gnawed at Yggdrasil's roots.

In 2007, to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Linnaeus' birth, a small lime tree was brought from Norway and planted in the garden at Voe House in Walls.

Oak trees are also used to protect properties (perhaps why the Conservative Party has appropriated its image as a symbol!). In Norse mythology it was the tree of the god of thunder, Thor – it is said indeed that in woodland oak trees are more prone to lightning strike than other species of comparable size – while in ancient Greece it was sacred to Zeus.

There is a legend that St. Boniface, who in the 8th Century converted Germans to Christianity, supplanted the pagan oak with a fir tree (its triangular shape symbolising the Holy Trinity), thus beginning the Christmas tree tradition. He is also credited with the chopping down of a 'Donar's Oak' in Germany and using its timber to build a church. Donar is synonymous with Thor, and hence we have Donnerstag and Thursday in German and English respectively.



*Young oak tree from western Norway
at Kergord*



*Aspen (centre) clinging to a cliff –
Ness of Houl, Shetland*

Another Shetland native, aspen, has Christian significance – legend has it that the Cross was made of its wood, and this is why it is shamefully restless, its leaves constantly trembling and rustling. Another unkindly, unchristian, and politically incorrect name for aspen, however, is ‘Mother-in-Law’s Tongue’.

The Glastonbury Thorn is a hawthorn (or Maythorn) which traditionally flowers at Christmas and allegedly grew from a staff plunged into the ground by Joseph of Arimathea. The saying “Ne’er cast a clout till May be out” refers to the thorn and its normal flowering time – though in Shetland you would have to wait till June for this to happen (both clothes-wise and floristically)!

The flowers of hawthorn are sweetly scented, but have a sickly odour as well. Traditionally they were banned from households, and scientists have found indeed that they possess a chemical identical to one of those contained in decomposing human bodies.

Hazel has been in the news recently, as nuts, or at least the kernels, were - surprisingly - found on trees in Shetland this year. These fruits, rich in vitamins and carbohydrates, were supposed to confer wisdom on those who ate them. The red spots on a wild salmon – a wise fish if ever there were one - were reputedly gained from the fish having consumed hazelnuts that fell into a pool from a surrounding grove. Dowsers have used hazel twigs to search for water.



*Hawthorn flowers – a bad home
omen?*

The magic and mystery of hazel is well conveyed, if somewhat romantically, by the Irish poet W. B. Yeats in 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' [a character of Celtic mythology]:

*I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.*

*When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire a-flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And some one called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.*

*Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.*



Hazel nut, Loch of Voe, February 2013

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Further reading:

Trees for Life (<http://www.treesforlife.org.uk/forest/mythfolk/index.html>) has a good webpage on the mythology and folklore of trees of the Caledonian Forest