

Tree Identification for Everyone

BIRCH

BEITHE – GAELIC

Betula – Latin

The Birch is our most common native tree, and is spread across most parts of the country. Its Gaelic name 'Beithe' – pronounced something like 'bayhay' – is very common in place-names, such as Beith in Sutherland, and Beath in Ayrshire. Old Scots 'Birk' is also common, as in Birkhall, Birkenbush and Birkin Hills.

There are three forms of Birch growing wild in Scotland – the very small and least common Dwarf Birch, and the much larger and much more common Downy Birch and Silver Birch. Silver Birch is most common in the cooler drier East, and Downy Birch in the milder damper West, but both are widely dispersed, and so alike in most respects that they often cross-breed.

Pure bred Silver – 'Betula pendula' in Latin – has a weeping or pendulous outline, its branches reaching up



and out and its fine twigs cascading down.

The twigs of Downy – in Latin 'Betula pubescens' – are straighter and mesh-like, and are literally 'downy' with fine hairs.



The bark of the Silver is silvery white, with dark open diamond-shaped marks, where branches began but failed.

The Silver can have a reddish tinge to parts of its trunk and branches, which is the dominant colouring of the Downy.

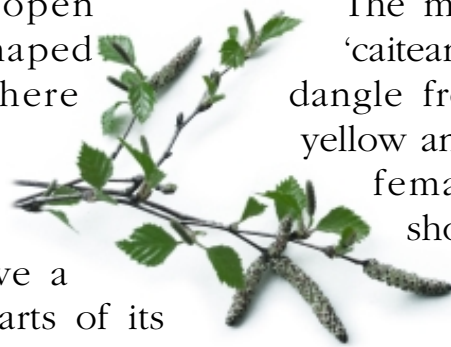
The twigs – 'meanglan' in Gaelic - of both Silver and Downy are a vivid red/maroon, making birch woods – 'coille beithe' in Gaelic - stand out in Winter.

The bark – 'rùisg' in Gaelic - is smooth but peeling in thin papery layers,



sometimes scaly and cracking on old specimens.

The sap – in Gaelic 'snothach', or 'sùgh' - has been tapped for wine and for shampoo. This is the tree of fertility, the bringing forth of new life at the beginning of Summer.



The male catkins – 'caitean' in Gaelic – dangle from the tree, yellow and brown, the female catkins short and erect, green and red.

As the Summer progresses the female catkins become tight clusters of tiny winged seeds, brown and light in the Autumn winds.



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