

# Know Your Stuff

## Trees in winter

Winter is here and many of the trees in Britain have shed their leaves leaving them looking naked and exposed in their dormant state. It is still possible though to identify them as there are many tell-tale signs that will help us distinguish trees and which will enhance our skills as budding naturalists too.

Broad-leaved trees are often easily recognised when their characteristic leaves are out during the warmer summer months. During the winter, however, many of these trees, being deciduous, shed their leaves making identification more difficult.

There are many ways of identifying trees during this dormant phase such as tree form and outline, bark, twig, leaf scar and bud. Of all these characteristics probably the most reliable feature to use is the bud. Buds will develop into leaves, stems or flowers and are either protected by bud scales, which are modified leaves, or are naked where no bud scales are visible.

This brief guide highlights ten trees found growing widely across the British Isles and includes identifying features in the form of bud and bark.



### **Beech - *Fagus Sylvatica***

A tree characteristic of chalk downlands but grows well on light soils elsewhere. It arrived into the country during the Bronze Age. Its young bark is smooth and silvery-grey but roughens with age, sometimes becoming scaly and rippled. The leaves turn bronze in the autumn and often remain on the branches all winter. The buds are shiny-brown, thin and pointed.

### **Rowan - *Sorbus aucuparia***

Often called Mountain Ash, although no relation of the Ash, Rowan is a rather solitary tree, seldom forming woods and can be found higher in the mountains than any other native tree. It was often planted outside houses to ward off witches and its strong, flexible wood was used for making tool handles. The bark is shiny, grey-brown and with dark dots. These are actually pores (lenticels) through which the tree breathes. Its buds are long, slender, dark purple and hairy.





### **Elder - *Sambucus nigra***

Growing as far away as north Africa and western Asia this is a native tree found in woods, scrub and waste places. It is often considered a weed, however it has many uses from wine-making to flavouring food and to treating flu! Its grey-brown bark is soft and cork-like and has dark spots – lenticels - used for breathing. The buds look like tiny pineapples and have spiky scales which are purple and appear opposite on the stem.

### **Ash - *Fraxinus excelsior***

A widespread native tree whose wood is a natural shock absorber! It has long been used for making tool handles and vehicle frames and is known in Norse mythology as the tree of life. The young bark is smooth and greenish-grey turning grey and fissured (ridged) with age. It produces distinctive black buds.



### **English Oak – *Quercus pedunculata***

Native to Europe and Britain and living to over 800 years old this is a highly valued tree. Its strong and durable timber was at the heart of Britain's buildings, ships and industry. The young bark is smooth and grey-green. As the tree ages its bark develops short, narrow cracks and vertical plates. The buds are light brown and spirally set on the stem. They form distinct clusters near the tip.

### **Alder - *Alnus glutinosa***

Alder is a common sight along riverbanks, marshes and wet woods. It is unusual as it is the only broad-leaved tree to produce cone-like woody fruits making it easy to identify in winter. Its timber is rot-resistant and has been used to make clogs and charcoal. The bark is grey-brown with square plates developing in mature trees. The buds are purple-mauve and club-shaped on a short grey, scaly stalk.



### **Goat Willow - *Salix caprea***

There are over 300 species of Willow growing almost everywhere in the world, except Australia. There are 18 species native to Britain, along with the numerous hybrids, and they are characteristic of lake and riversides. Goat, or Pussy Willow, is identified by its pale grey bark. It is banded with diamond-shaped cracks and can develop shallow, criss-crossed ridges. Buds are produced on red, silver-haired stems and are rounded and

with a single, red scale.



### **Hazel - *Corylus avellana***

Native across Europe to western Asia and north Africa Hazel is often grown for its nuts or fencing and charcoal. It grows as a multi-stemmed shrub which is readily coppiced producing a cluster of straight, flexible stems. The bark begins light grey-brown and slightly shiny with fissures developing in mature shoots. The bark can appear to peel in fragile strips. The buds are short, blunt with green-red scales. The shoots are roughly hairy.

### **Silver Birch - *Betula pendula***

The first tree to colonise Europe and north America after the last Ice Age. Despite its delicate appearance, the Birch is a pioneer tree rooting where most other trees cannot establish. It is fast-growing and often planted as a nursery for other tree species. Its bark is white with thin horizontal lines and dark diamond shapes and may develop thick, corky fissures with dark knobby ridges. Its buds are cylindrical and alternate on the stem. The twigs are hairless with whitish warts.



### **Sycamore - *Acer pseudoplatanus***

Commonly found in woodlands and field boundaries. It is thought to have been introduced to Britain from Europe by the Romans. The young bark is smooth and silvery-grey but as it ages it darkens and develops cracks and curling square scales. Its buds are arranged in opposite pairs. They are egg-shaped with a pointed green end.

