



Aibidil na Gàidhlig le Craobhan



The Gaelic Alphabet Through Trees

A



Ailm

(al-lim)

Elm

Elm trees grow very tall and straight and were thought to represent perspective and enlightenment – in Celtic lore the elm is associated with the passage to the underworld.

Elm wood can withstand wet conditions well so has traditionally been used to build boats. It was also hollowed out to be used to carry water before the introduction of metal water pipes.

B



Beith

(bay)

Birch

Birch is the most common native tree in Scotland – and one of the most recognisable with its silver bark and small light green leaves.

It is recognised as a pioneer species so is associated with birth and renewal. It is one of the first species to come into leaf each year so is a symbol of spring.



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C

Coll
(call)

Hazel



Hazel is related to the Birch family of trees and can be found across all of Scotland – the Isle of Coll is named after the Gaelic version of the word.

Hazel provides an important source of nuts for squirrels and other rodents.

The wood can be encouraged to bend as it grows so can be used to making walking sticks.

D

Dair
(dahr)

Oak



Oak are renowned for providing a habitat for more organisms than any other species of tree – including insects, fungus, lichens, mosses which then in turn support other species such as birds and mice.

Oaks are prone to more lightning strikes than any other tree – partly due to their height but also due to their high water content.



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E



Eadha
(eh-yah)
Aspen

Aspen can reach a height of 20 metres and is an important species in terms of biodiversity – they can support more than 60 different species of insects.

Aspen was regarded as a magical tree with lightweight wood perfect for making shields which were thought to protect the bearer from more than just physical harm.

F



Feàrn
(feyarn)
Alder

Alder is often found along river banks with their long roots helping to reduce erosion. The wood does not rot in wet conditions and was therefore used to build some of the canal system in Venice.

A green dye can be made from Alder flowers which is reported to have been used to dye the clothes of Robin Hood.



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G

Gort
(gorsht)
Ivy



Ivy is an evergreen plant with hairy stems which allow it to climb up surfaces such as trees.

Ivy is important in providing food such as berries, pollen and nectar for insects and birds,

Ivy is believed to bring good fortune – it is sometimes used in wedding flowers and bouquets to bring good luck.

H

Uath
(oo-ah)
Hawthorn



Hawthorn is often referred to as the Maytree as the white flowers appear in May – symbolising the end of spring and start of summer.

In Celtic mythology hawthorns are said to be associated with fairies – guarding the entrance to the fairy realm as well as fairies living within them. It was therefore thought to be unlucky to bring them inside.



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I



Iogh
(ee-ogh)
Yew

Yew trees can grow and survive for hundreds of years. The Fortingall Yew near Aberfeldy is thought to be between 2 and 3 thousand years old but could be up to 9 thousand years old!

Yew wood is very hard and was the wood of choice for making long bows – Robert the Bruce is said to have used yew long bows in the Battle of Bannockburn.

L



Luis
(looss)
Rowan

Rowans can grow at higher altitudes than any other tree in Scotland giving rise to its alternative name Mountain Ash.

In mythology the colour red was thought to protect against evil and magic – so the rowan's bright red berries meant that people planted a rowan near their house to protect them from witchcraft and enchantment.



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M

Muin
(moon)
Vine



Muin can represent both vine and bramble and is a symbol of happiness and of speaking the truth – perhaps due to certain beverages that could be made from both grapes or blackberries!

N

Nuin
(noon)
Ash



Ash normally grows 15-18 metres tall with the tallest ash growing to 38 metres in the UK. It is among the last trees to gain its leaves in the spring and one of the first to lose them in the autumn.

In folklore ash is said to have healing and protective properties especially when associated with children - a cradle made of ash was thought to protect babies being stolen away by the fairies.



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O



Oir/Onn

(ohr/awn)

Gorse

An evergreen shrub with bright yellow flowers which smell of coconut. The flowers can be used to dye clothes and the wood, which burns at a high temperature due to its natural oils, used as fuel.

Gorse can grow back quickly if damaged so is associated with resilience and optimism. A sprig of gorse hung in your house or worn on your clothes may help you to overcome any adversity.

P



Pheith bhog

(pay voh-k)

Downy Birch

Downy birch (whose twigs are covered in fine hair known as down) prefers wetter soils than its relative the silver birch and therefore is more common the further west you go in Scotland.

Birch is known for its medicinal properties – the leaves are antiseptic and the sap was used for skin complaints.



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R



Ruis
(roosh)
Elder

Elder is widespread across the UK but uncommon in the Highlands of Scotland as it prefers deeper and richer soils.

Like the rowan, elder is believed to have protective properties – planting an elder by your house was said to keep the Devil away. So having a rowan tree by the front door and an elder at the back was thought to provide the best protection for you and your home.

S



Suil
(sool)
Willow

Eared willow occurs throughout Scotland and is one of the few species found in Shetland. It is a pioneer species so is one of the first to colonise open ground – especially where the soil is a bit wetter.

Its bendable and flexible wood means that it is good for use in making wicker baskets but is also used for making cricket bats.



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T



Teine

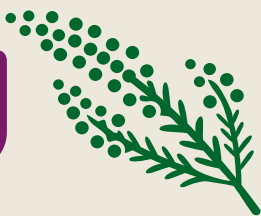
(chain-yuh)

Whin

Whin looks very similar to gorse but has small green leaves and fewer spines which are brown in colour.

In some versions of the Gaelic Tree Alphabet, T represents holly. Holly is an evergreen so represents immortality and regeneration. Felling a whole holly tree was believed to bring bad luck – but a few sprigs for decoration in your house was thought to protect you from naughty fairies.

U



Ur

(oor)

Heather

Heather rivals the thistle as the emblem of Scotland and can be found across much of the country. The tiny bell like flowers are a source of nectar for bees over winter. White heather is said to be lucky.

Heather is very versatile and can be used to make ale and mead as well as a host of medicines to treat coughs and rheumatism. Heather tea is a supposed favourite of Robert Burns.