

Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*)



General Information

Beech was a late entrant to Great Britain arriving after the last glaciation. The beech is classified as a native in the south of England and as a non-native in the north. Beech is widely planted for hedging and in deciduous woodlands. The tallest and longest hedge in the world is the Meikleour Beech Hedge in Meikleour near Perth. Many of what now seem like ancient beech woods were actually planted quite recently. It became fashionable for Beech trees to be planted in the grounds of private estates of wealthy landowners in the 17/18th centuries because of their stately aspect. The timber is used for a variety of purposes, including fuel, furniture, cooking utensils, tool handles and sports equipment. The wood burns well and was traditionally used to smoke herring. You will find more of these trees scattered throughout the Rothiemurchus Estate.



Vital statistics:

Beech trees can live up to 300 years and grow to around 30-40m in height developing into giants, which tower over other woodland trees.



Box of Knowledge:

The English word 'book' is derived from the Anglo Saxon 'boec' as writing was often carved on the soft beech wood. The bark of many beech trees are covered in personal names and dates going back centuries. A few of our Beech trees already have some marks on them but we ask that you do not add any history of your own!



Ecosystem

Although beech leaves are reluctant to fall, when they do, the leaves often carpet the woodland floor to such an extent that little else can grow; woods often become exclusively beech over time. Some rarer plant species and a variety of orchids do grow under its dense canopy, which makes beech woodland an important habitat for many butterflies, including the white admiral.

Beech mast is a favourite food of many woodland animals such as badgers, deer, mice, squirrels, birds and certain species of caterpillars also eat the leaves.

Because beech trees live for so long they provide habitats for many deadwood specialists such as hole-nesting birds and wood-boring insects. The bark is often home to a variety of fungi, mosses and lichens.

Box of Knowledge

In Celtic mythology, Fagus was the god of beech trees. It was thought to have medicinal properties and beech leaves were used to relieve swellings. The leaves were boiled to make a poultice.

Flowers, Seeds, bark and leaves

Beech is a broad tree with smooth grey bark, often with horizontal etchings. Young leaves are lime green with silky hairs, which become darker green and lose their hairs as they mature. They are 4–9cm long, stalked, oval and pointed at the tip, with a wavy edge.

Mature Beech have a light wispy look to their outer twigs, while the main side branches are usually as thick as many other tree species. The crackly, bronze dead leaves often remain right through winter, especially on young trees, which are not prey to high winds.

Beech is monoecious, meaning both male and female flowers grow on the same tree. It flowers from April through to May. The tassel-like male catkins hang from long stalks at the end of twigs. Female flowers have four spiny lobes containing two triangular brown nuts. The seeds are known as 'mast' and have a distinctively 3-sided shape. The opened pods often remain on the tree long after the seed has fallen. Beech is clearly identifiable with its alternate slender bronze buds ready to develop on zig - zagging twigs. The reddish brown, torpedo-shaped leaf buds form on short stalks, and have a distinctive criss-cross pattern. You can see many young beech that have taken advantage of a clearing below the TreeCreeper course.



Box of Knowledge:

In France the edible nuts, or masts are still sometimes roasted and used as a coffee substitute.



References:

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<http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/learn/british-trees/native-trees/common-beech/> (Accessed: 4 April 2014)

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