



Yew Tree



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Latin: *Taxus baccata*

Irish: *Iúr*

The yew is one of Ireland's very few native evergreen trees. It is one of the oldest species of tree growing in Northern Europe.

The yew is also highly poisonous and is sometimes known as the 'death tree'.

It can grow to a height of about 20 metres.

Many areas in Ireland are named after the yew tree. For example, the Irish name for Mayo is Maigh Eo, which means 'plain of the yew'. Killarney National Park in Co. Kerry is home to one of the few pure native yew forests in Europe.

Description: The yew tree has a dark brown, rusty-coloured bark. It is easily recognised by its dark green, pointed, flat needles. The flowers of the yew appear in March and April, while the fruit appears in the summer. Woody cones grow on the male yew tree while bright red berries grow on the female yew tree in autumn.

Growth: The yew tree grows in an unusual way. When the branches of the yew touch the ground, they root themselves and eventually grow to form new trunks. As the yew tree continues to grow outwards, the trunk is often hollow when it grows old. This makes ring counting impossible, so it is very difficult to date a yew tree. However, it is believed that the oldest tree in Ireland is the Silken Thomas yew tree in Maynooth. It is 700-800 years old.

Celtic link: The yew tree was very sacred to the Celts. Many Celtic shrines and burial sites were located near groves of yew trees. The yew tree is still found at Churches and graveyards today, as many Christian churches were built on the sacred sites that were once used by druids.

Ogham: Ogham, the Celtic alphabet system, was based on trees. The Celts believed trees had different characteristics, emotions and magical or healing powers. The letters of this alphabet were linked to the names of trees.

The Ogham letter for the yew tree was 'I' (*Ioho*).