

# A tree for every garden



This week Lynn O'Keeffe explores the world of trees in her final article of the year on common gardening conundrums

I really enjoy this time of year, as the evenings draw in, and the golds, reds and burnt oranges of leaves glow in autumnal sunshine.

Some species have stronger autumn colour than others, with soils and weather affecting leaf colour too. Lots of plants have autumn colour, but trees are the most dramatic. Trees do so much for us apart from autumn beauty, they provide a wonderful habitat for other wildlife from birds to beetles, they bring shade and shelter, add height to the garden, filter pollutants from the air, absorb carbon dioxide, alleviate flooding, stabilize soil, and provide oxygen.

Of the top three things you can do to increase biodiversity in your garden (based on a study in Sheffield) one is planting trees, the others are putting in a pond and making a compost heap.

In short, I recommend planting trees.

You can plant trees for births or birthdays, to celebrate a wedding, commemorate an event, or to remember a loved one. They mark time for us, carry religious and cultural significance, like the yew in the old graveyard or the hawthorn covered in rags and prayers at the holy well.

Communities can get very attached to trees and woodlands, and we used to give them the strongest of legal protections with

the Brehon laws, where to fell someone's mature Scots pine, Oak or Crab apple could set you back a fine of 2 1/2 milk cows. Which is over €4,000 in today's money- and right they were too!

So, you've decided to plant more trees in your garden or the green of your housing estate. Am I right? Fair play to you! Let's get on with what to plant where.

## SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Planting small young trees or saplings is the best option in most scenarios. Larger specimens take longer to establish, need staking, watering and feeding in the first couple of years, can suffer dieback, and cost an awful lot more. So, buy your trees small and cheap and plant a couple extra, just in case a few fail.

The best option is to buy bare root in winter, and plant this side of Christmas, this gives trees the chance to settle in ahead of bud burst in spring. Bare root trees can be ordered online or are available in most garden centres from November on. You also avoid the plastic pot and peat compost, another advantage, but you do need to be ready to plant out straight away.

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT TREE

There's a tree to suit most spaces. They can be narrow like birch, small like mountain ash, cast



Birch tree in the long grass

a heavy shade like beech, have big tough leaves that block gutters like sycamores, or be light and delicate like the Japanese acers.

So, look around you at what grows well in your area, and which ones you like. Our native trees cover a wide range of types and are the best choice for biodiversity. Some of the lesser known ones are Whitebeam, which has minty green leaves in spring and stays small, or Aspen, whose leaves tremble in the lightest breeze and turn bright yellow in autumn, but grows very tall.

The mountain ash and the crab apple have ornamental versions with blossoms, fruits and leaves in a range of colours. Scots pine is our native conifer and a good addition to any mixed planting.

And then there's the native oaks, which support the most amount of species by far and hold a special place in all our hearts.

We should all plant an oak, even if it'll mature long after we are gone, for who planted the magnificent oaks you come across now in parks and woods? Who is planting the oaks of the future?

## MINDING YOUR TREES

Young trees benefit from watering in very dry spells. Larger specimens, newly planted, require significant watering to do well. By year two, they should have roots out and by year 3 be self-sufficient. Current best practise is to dig as small a planting hole as possible and not add any fertility, to

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encourage the tree to root out into the surrounding ground.

Staking should be low down and temporary. It's the blowing in the breeze that stimulates strong trunks to form so trees shouldn't be staked rigidly.

Young trees are helped by not competing with long thick grass. So, mulch with bark mulch or weed around the base. Wildflower meadow and trees work well together, and on greens or at schools where footballs and football are significant, planting in a tyre or raised bed can give protection to the young trees.

## A WORD ON STRIMMERS

Strimmers and trees do not go well together - ever! No matter how careful the strimmer operator says they'll be. Never let strimmers anywhere near trees. Even small damage to bark can be a huge set back. Clear around trees by hand first before strimming, or don't trim at all.

## NO SPACE

You've no space for trees? Or live in an apartment or have a tiny

garden? Well then, campaign for more trees in our parks and on our streets. Join the Native Woodland Trust and support the work they do protecting various sites of native woodland and planting new ones. Consider trees as gifts for friends and family who do have space. Visit woodlands and parks to get your fix of that clean tree air, knowing that your footfall is helping to protect their funding!

## TOP TIP - LOOK UP

Watch out for overhead wires and don't plant underneath or your lovely trees could have their heads cut off by services providers!.

**Lynn O'Keeffe, DSc Horticulture, Craft gardener with the OPW at Portumna Castle Co. Galway and Horticulture tutor with the Galway Roscommon Education and Training Board.**

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Acer cappadocicum 3