

Befriend the Himalayan birch In the Astley Ainslie



Do you want to be able to continue walking with trees in the Astley Ainslie, the most complete Victorian urban landscape in South Edinburgh where there are 1700 trees with 60 different species, and several of them are over 100 years old?

Well if you care, get involved. And one way to do that is to befriend a tree. Choose your own special tree in the Astley Ainslie (AA) and keep an eye on it. You will enjoy learning more about trees, and also increase the chances that your tree won't be cut down when the NHS leaves the site. It would be great if generations to come can enjoy the trees in the Astley Ainslie.



Astley Ainslie Community Trust
Walking with Tree events

Suggestions for looking out for your tree

Make friends with a tree and rediscover our natural connection. Choose a tree, spend time observing and thinking about it, and document how it changes during the seasons. Come back and visit it over and over again to see what it is like at different times of the year, in the rain or a gale as well as in the sunshine. You can be factual or fantastic – what is it like to be a tree?

- Start a notebook, journal or scrapbook
- Draw or paint it, or make a rubbing of its bark
- Write a poem or sing a song about it

When does it bud? When does it break into leaf, flower, and develop seeds? When do the nuts drop from your tree and when do its leaves change colour and finally drop to the ground, forming a deep carpet beneath the tree? You could also think about:

- When was it planted, and was it connected with any historical events?
- What is its height and spread, and its girth (the diameter of its trunk)
- What birds, mammals and insects does it support?
- Does it look healthy?
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Engage with your tree. Check out Peter Wohlleben's¹ book – find out what dramas are being played out around your tree, and what its social network is.

- Slow down, breathe deep, and look around
- What can you hear? What do you see? How do you feel?

Record any information you want. These are just suggestions.

Our knowledge and experience of nature is now slender. We need to recreate the understanding that we are only a part of nature, and wholly dependent upon it for our lives, health and well-being, and even our survival.

Visit our website at: <https://aact.scot>

Go to our website for information and suggestions for tree befriending, including links to other useful websites, TED talks, apps, books, and how to share information about trees.

¹ Wohlleben, P. (2015). The Hidden Life of Trees. What they feel, how they communicate.

Some anecdotes about the Himalayan Birch

The Himalayan birch takes its name from the Latin for birch: *betula* and its specific name, *utilis*, describes the many uses of the different parts of the tree. It is native to the West Himalaya of Nepal and the northern region in India, growing at elevations up to 4,500 m (14,800 ft.). It was named by the Scottish botanist David Don in 1825 from specimens collected in Nepal in 1820.

Its bright, white, paper-like bark was used centuries ago in India as paper for writing long scriptures in Sanskrit scripts and other texts. Its use as paper for books goes back to the 4th century CE until paper was introduced in the 16th Century. It is still used as paper for the writing of sacred mantras, with the bark placed in an amulet and worn for protection or blessing. The Sanskrit word for the tree is *bhûrja*—sharing a similarity with other Indo-European words that provide the origin for the common name “birch”.

The bark has many uses. According to legend, it was used as clothing by followers of Lord Shiva and is widely used for packaging material (particularly butter), roof construction, umbrella covers, bandages, and more. Wood is used for bridge construction, and the foliage for fodder. Its most widespread use is firewood which has led to the destruction or the reduction of its habitat.

Parts of the plant, including the bark and fungal growth have long been used in local traditional medicine including wounds bleeding and healing and treating coughs. Research has also identified its potential anti-cancer potential and anti-oxidant activity.

Photographs below:

- Himalayan birch in Scotland
- Recording the tree walk talk and photographing the tree in the Astley Ainslie.



Himalayan Birch

This is a fast growing deciduous tree (losing its leaves in the autumn). There is a single Himalayan Birch with bright white bark in front of the WRVS café in the Astley Ainslie.

Common name: Himalayan birch **Scientific name:** *Betula utilis*

Overview: A birch tree native to the Himalayas to west China. It grows as a shrub or tree reaching up to 20 m. The thin, papery bark is very shiny, reddish brown, reddish white, or white, with horizontal lenticels (raised pores) and peels off in broad, horizontal belts. It is closely related to the beech and oak family.

Leaves: Dark green leaves are oval, 5 to 10 cm long, with serrated or double serrated margins, on hairy stalks and hairs scattered above them. Autumn colour is yellow.

Flowers: Flowering takes place from May–July, with only a few male catkins, and short, single (sometimes paired) female catkins. Both male and female flowers are present on the same tree. About 3-5 inches long yellowish-brown male flowers appear in drooping catkins and about 1.5 inches long greenish female flowers appears in much smaller, upright catkins. Male catkins have embossed scales in winter.

Fruits: Female flowers are followed by drooping cone-like fruits that contain numerous small winged seeds which usually mature in July to August.

Look out for: The lenticels in the stem that allows gas exchange between the atmosphere and the internal tissues; the tiny winged seeds which acts as pollinator and are so light that they may be carried for several hundred miles.

Identified in winter by: Its interesting bark

Value to wildlife: Game birds, insect pollinators, small mammals, song birds.

Threats: Susceptible to fungal diseases.



Leaf, male flowers (catkins), bark, winged seed