

## Tree of the Month

### Hazel

(Poets Tree)

Month: 06/08 to 02/09



Hazel is a large shrub, often with multiple trunks, growing up to about 10m tall, usually in damp areas, and can live for up to 80 years. However, if coppiced (cut down to ground level and allowed to regenerate over a 5 to 10 year cycle) it can live for

about 200 years. The soft, downy, leaves are a pointed oval with serrated edges and open in early spring; starting off lime green, turning to greeny-brown and pinks in the autumn, and ending up as yellow in late November. The male catkins and female flowers grow on the same tree. The catkins change from their winter brown to green in about January, turning into fluffy, golden, pollen-covered 'lambs tails', and shed their pollen in early spring when the snowdrops flower. The pollen is trapped in a red 'brush' at the tip of the small bud-like flower and fertilises the seed, forming into hard green nuts that turn brown by late autumn. The nuts may be eaten direct from the tree, and are food for squirrels, dormice and many birds, including nut-hatches. Any uneaten nuts fall to ground where some become seedlings. The leaves provide food for many moth caterpillars, which dormice also eat.

Hazel wood is very flexible and may be knotted. The Romans used it for tying up vines. Other uses include thatching spars (springels), water and mineral divining sticks, coracle frames, and woven hurdles and furniture. Coppiced Hazel has become a management tool for the conservation of wildlife habitats and the long straight shoots have many uses, including whips, pea sticks and bean poles. Pilgrims staffs used to be made from Hazel rods.

Long hazel poles can be bent and set onto a circular frame with an entrance made of smaller rods and covered with skins, thatch, or tarpaulin to make shelters called 'benders', similar to an igloo shape. They were made with additional rooms and even windows.

Hazel was esteemed as a plant of virtue with the power to cure fevers and diarrhoea. Specific healing uses of the tree are few. Carrying a double hazel nut was said to prevent toothache and the nut kernels mixed with mead were thought to be good for clearing persistent coughs. Hazels atmosphere is said to exhude exhilaration and inspiration, and being near hazel is said to bring the spirit alive.

The Coll (or Cal), to give Hazel it's druidic name, was regarded as the tree of knowledge and its nuts were said to be the ultimate receptacles of wisdom. Celtic legends tell of a sacred well with nine hazels surrounding it. The salmon swimming in the well ate the nuts that fell from the hazels and a spot appeared on their sides for each tree they ate nuts from. A nine-spotted salmon was a king salmon and contained all knowledge. These salmon were considered sacred and anyone who killed or ate one would be punished by the gods; however the legends also tell of men, who caught and ate a king salmon with a nut from each tree, attaining mystical powers of divination.

One of the earliest 'Kings' of Ireland was named MacColl (Son of Hazel), and the old name for Scotland – Caledonia – is thought to derive from "Cal Don" (Hazel Hill).

Hazel is aligned with Mercury (aka Hermes), the winged messenger of the gods, who 'goes like the wind' and carries a hazel staff with two ribbons streaming out to show the speed of travel across land and water (The ribbons are sometimes shown as two snakes entwined along the staff, becoming the symbol for healers used to this day). He gave the qualities of eloquence, heraldry, inventiveness and cunning to men, taught the arts of cultivation and flying, and offered protection to travellers.

Hazels associations with water and the mysterious life-cycle of the leaping salmon (who return to their birth-pool after four years swimming in the sea and lay their eggs during the time Hazel is dropping its nuts), and with Mercury (a fast moving, eloquent, and inventive spirit) made it a powerful tree. Writers, poets, and artists all gained inspiration when in its presence (Haslemere – "*Hazel Pool*" - has long been considered a centre for the arts. Conan Doyle, Tennyson, and the composer Rachel Portman all lived there).

Meditating in the presence of Hazel needs care because of its powerful influence and mystics used it as a catalyst to go 'flying' in the body of a hawk, viewing the earth through its eyes and senses (an early form of air reconnaissance?)

Magicians wands were cut from a young Hazel, before it bore fruit, using a magic sickle. The sickle was made magical by bathing it in a concoction that included the blood from a magpie!

