

# Tree of the Month

## YEW

(Month: 29/10 to 25/11)

### **ALL PARTS OF THE YEW ARE POISONOUS**



The evergreen Yew is very ancient and once formed part of the primordial forests that covered large parts of the earth. They are slow growing, with dense foliage and a rounded top, and can get up to about 20m tall, with a spread of about 25m. The dark green, needle-like, leaves are arranged in a



double spiral the tree for about female flowers can lie dormant early in the male flower release pollen or depending on the and March. The (pin-head size) green, bud-like, female flower by the wind and, in good conditions, the male tree can seem to be covered by a yellow haze. The fertilised female flower develops a small black seed that is covered by an open-ended "berry" filled with liquid, called an "aril". The aril is eaten by birds



around the twig and stay on 8 years. The male and grow on different trees and for several years, appearing spring. The small, yellowish, carries a sac that opens to closes to retain it, conditions, during February pollen is carried to the tiny

that deposit the undigested seed away from the parent tree.

Most Yews live for about 500 years but some live for 1000s, and there are many that were said to be 'venerable' at the time mediaeval churches were being built near them. The oldest tree in Britain is the Fortingall Yew in Perthshire that is claimed to be up to 9,000 years old. The yew achieves its longevity because, as the tree ages, younger shoots grow up around the trunk, merging with it and forming a large fluted, multi-stemmed, trunk. The centre may die, and many old yews are hollow, but the tree is supported and nourished by the surrounding limbs. It can take some 150 years for the trunk to develop.

Yew wood is dense, close-grained, and of a golden-yellow colour that takes a fine polish. It burns very hot, does not rot in water, and was used for furniture, panelling, ships masts and spars, dugout boats, fence posts, and wine barrels. Because of its strength; Yew posts were said to outlast those made of iron. The long bow, with which English archers devastated the might of France, was made of Yew. It was a powerful weapon in the right hands and the art of making a bow was passed down from father to son. (If you'd like to have a go; try following this link: [www.archerylibrary.com/books/pope/hunting-with-bow-and-arrow/chapter05\\_1.html](http://www.archerylibrary.com/books/pope/hunting-with-bow-and-arrow/chapter05_1.html) – Good luck!) "England were but a fling with the Eugh and the wild goose wing" – Birch arrow, Yew bow, and goose-wing fletching.

With its dense foliage; Yew makes a good hedge and lends itself to the art of topiary.

The bark, needles, and seeds of Yew contain a poison called Taxin, a powerful nerve-agent, and they should be treated with caution and **never** imbibed. A tincture of young Yew shoots and berries (not the seed) is used in homeopathy to treat cystitis, headaches, neuralgia, gout and rheumatism. Taxol, an anti-cancer drug, has been found in the bark and needles (it is difficult and expensive to extract).

The sacred Yew was seen as a symbol for death and resurrection by many cultures. Yew twigs were placed in burial shrouds and they have long been associated as places of worship adjacent to burial sites. This custom was carried through to the Christian era as early missionaries preached under Yews, and many churches were built near them. Yew branches were carried in processions at Easter, and during burials, to symbolise resurrection. Imagine this: a stand of 20m tall Yews, with 4m thick fluted trunks and great limbs (like beams) reaching out to meet each other, climbing to a dense canopy of dark green needles. The Druids held their gatherings amongst them, for they would have been seen as places of great power, mystery, and magic. The Romans destroyed many of the old Yew groves during their attempts to eradicate druidism.

Sprigs of Yew were taken into homes during the winter to ward off evil spirits, and near-by trees were adorned with sparkling ornaments to bring light into dark winter days.

How many, potentially 'magical', Yew "circles" have you found in the woodlands?