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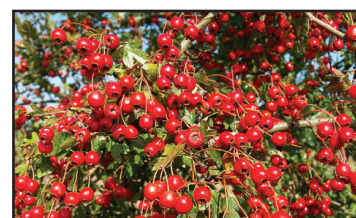
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Feature HOME & GARDEN

The May Tree

Grant Jenkins of The Tree Company talks about the mythical background to the much loved Hawthorn tree



The common hawthorn in West Cork is typically found in hedgerows and as a boundary tree — it is a tough, enduring tree that withstands the extremes of weather, pressure from livestock and human intervention. In some exposed spots it can be seen as the only solitary tree silhouetted against the skyline, its branches wind pruned with the distinctive unbalanced crown forged by the elements. Its rugged appeal can be put to good use in the garden as an individual specimen tree where it can grow up to fifteen metres high and can live for over two hundred and fifty years in the right environment. The hawthorn or whitethorn tree because of its flowering time is commonly known as the May tree and has been used by man for thousands of years as a 'living' boundary protecting the homestead and livestock, as it tolerates animal browsing of the new shoots and the cutting of its branches by man, it reacts by growing back in a thick mass of thorny shoots.

When hawthorns are allowed to grow into larger trees the leaves can turn yellow, orange and deep red in autumn and the bark fissures and cracks turning into brown and orange rectangles. If grown as a stock proof hedge and managed well it can provide protection for up to thirty years. The hawthorns sharp spikes which both protect and repel are actually modified branches and anyone who has worked with these trees will know how they can penetrate through almost any protective clothing on the market today.

Crataegus monogyna is the latin name for this native tree, *Crataegus* is the classical Greek name for hawthorn meaning 'strength' and *monogyna* means one stile or seed.

Hawthorns come into leaf early in the year, the leaves usually unfurling in March or early April are followed by the small five petal white and occasionally pink blossoms which are at their most impressive in May. The tree is smothered in blooms and the countryside is punctuated by this beautiful floral display. A harvest of berries or haws hang heavy on the branches and start to ripen in late August

lasting well into the winter, the vivid red of the berries attract many species of birds but blackbirds and thrushes particularly make the most of this winter larder, in this way hawthorn seeds are spread around the countryside. As a native tree it is a source of habitat and sustenance to a wide range of wildlife especially providing protection as a thorny home for nesting or roosting birds. The leaves provide a food source for many insects especially the caterpillars of various moths.

In folk law the hawthorn was considered a fairy tree this was especially true of an isolated tree — 'no good would come to you if you interfered with a fairy tree!' There was a wide spread belief that it was unlucky to bring the flowers into the house — blossoms were considered unlucky resulting in illness or death. Recent research has found gruesome evidence that the flowers have a small amount of the same chemical that can be found in dead animal tissue indeed to some people the flowers have the faint sweet scent of decay, explaining perhaps the origins of these deathly omens. The tree may have developed this scent to attract flies and midges to aid pollination along with bee activity.

The hawthorn is closely associated with many Mayday festivals and the arrival of summer's bounty. Hawthorn boughs were cut and placed around the outside of the house near to May eve and it was customary to hang decorations of ribbons, flowers and trinkets from their branches. Cut boughs outside the house were also used to guard against witches' spells. Folk law and traditions surrounding hawthorn vary widely from one county to another and even between villages. So much folklore and legend surrounds hawthorn that it is worthy of an article of its own, so if you are interested there is a wonderful book called *Irish Trees, Myths, Legends and Folklore* by Niall Mac Coitir published by Collins press that covers this subject.

The wood of hawthorn is tough and hard, however there is hardly any traditional use for it, maybe its connection with the fairy world has afforded it some

protection over the years. Today its practical use to us is mainly to protect and contain in the form of hedging, for our native wildlife it is protection and food store rolled into one. Hawthorn is often over looked in favour of more exotic species in the garden, but for many, the May tree epitomises the end of spring and the onset of summer, its strong thorny branches and its delicate white blossom are in perfect contrasting harmony, a stalwart beauty.

If you need any further information regarding this article or indeed any other tree matters please get in touch with us at The Tree Company, Ballydehob, Co Cork or email us at info@thetreecompany.ie or call our office on 028 37630.

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