

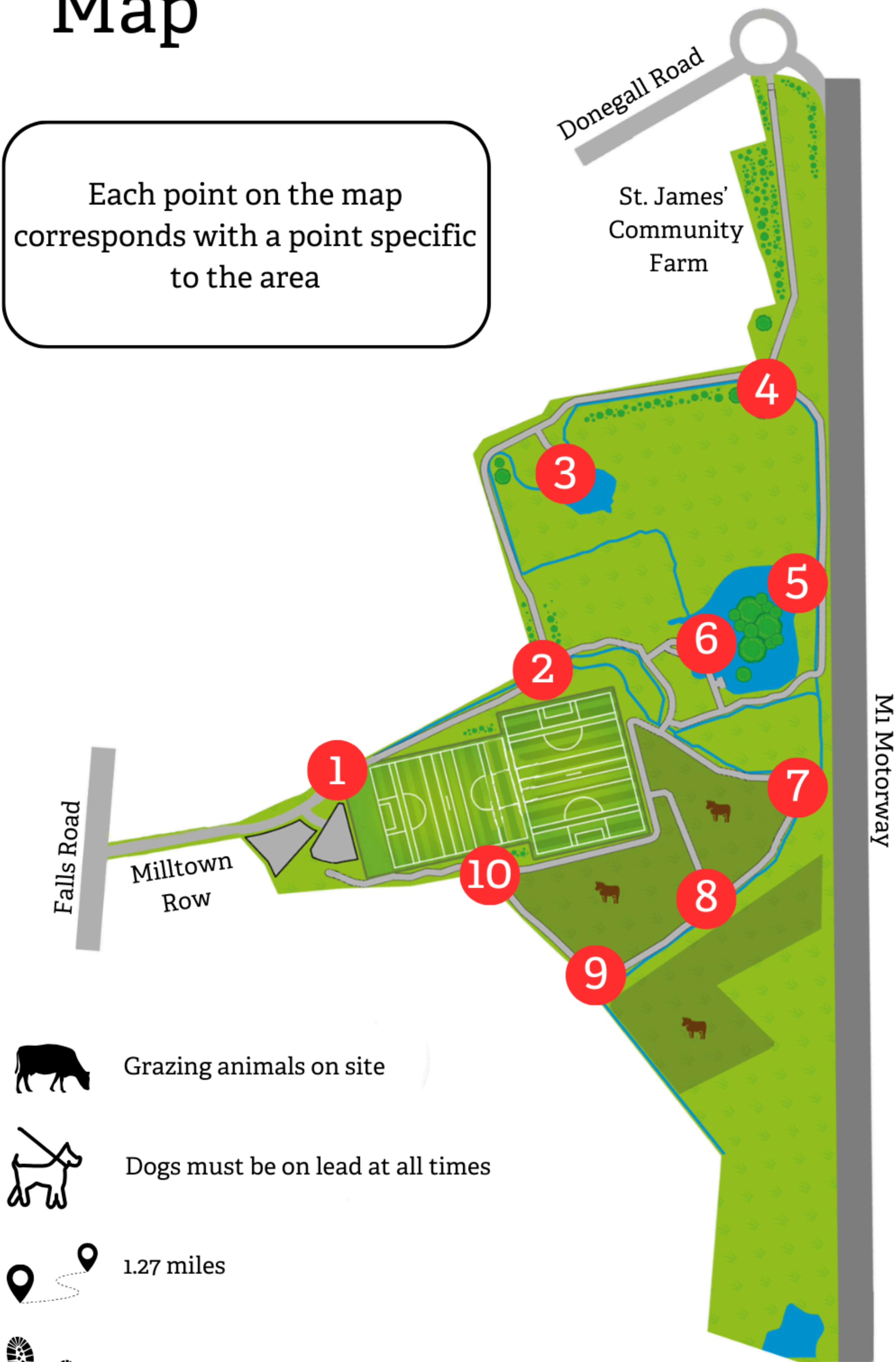


Our Trees & their Folklore



Map

Each point on the map corresponds with a point specific to the area





Introduction

When people first arrived in Ireland, trees would have been vital to survival, for shelter, food, heat, and home to much of the wildlife they hunted.

Trees hold a special place in the history and culture of Ireland and throughout history were seen as sacred. The Ogham (OH-UM) language placed trees at the centre with each letter named after or associated with a native tree. Over ten thousand place names in Ireland now originate from Gaelic tree names.

Folklore and mythology are packed with tales of trees, the most famous are perhaps fairy trees which can be seen in fields across Ireland.



1. Ash -Noin

From Norse to Celtic mythology, the stories of the Ash tree stretch far and wide.

Ash has strong links with Norse mythology, “Yggdrasil” The World Tree was an ash that spanned between worlds, roots piecing the under-realm and branches reaching the heavens. This mental image runs through much of tree mythology across many cultures.

In Ireland, ash was planted as a sacred guardian tree. People would refuse to cut it down in case their homes were burned by the Sidhe, fairy folk. It was used for divination by the Druids.

St Patrick is said to have used an ash staff when he banished the snakes from Ireland. In Gaelic its known as Uinnseann and its English name comes from the darkened tips on the end of each branch in winter.

It also provided straight and strong spears and hurling sticks.

At Bog Meadows it's a great tree for wildlife, as it provides food for birds such as Bullfinch in winter, and nesting sites and roosts for bats.



2. Alder - Fearn

Protected by water fairy folk, its associated with safety and protection, it thrives in wet, swampy areas throughout Europe.

The wood does not rot in water and has been put to good use from the Bronze age to today, shoring up canal banks, clogs and even supporting Venice much of which is on alder piles.

Alder is the nearest that we get to mangroves as it produces roots above ground which provide fish with shelter from predators.

It was once a crime to cut down alder, as it was believed this would anger the tree spirit who would burn down your house in revenge. This may be because the wood is white and when freshly cut the sap bleeds orange-red. This is associated with a Celtic legend called 'The Red Man' or Fear Dearg who helped humans lost in the Otherworld to escape back to reality.

Alder was also seen as a symbol of balance between male and female, as it has both male and female catkins on the same branch.

Its very beneficial to wildlife here at Bog Meadows, the lesser redpoll particularly enjoy the seeds within the alder cones in Winter and food for insects through it's leaves.



3. Reeds & Rushes - Coigeal na mban sí

Providing light, protection, and a home for wildlife, reeds and rushes have had many uses throughout history.

The words rushes and reeds are often interchanged in general use. The reeds here are in fact great reedmace colloquially known as Bulrush.

In Celtic mythology reeds had many associations, positive and negative. Reeds were often viewed as a symbol of evil, being used by spirits or fairies rather than humans.

The Reeds were used by fairies to make musical instruments and weapons. The Clurichaun, a cousin of the leprechaun, would ride the reed stalks, like a witch.

They were also seen as a protective plant, used in roofing, talismans, and charms, believed to be protection against evil and cleanse the home of bad luck.

Reed lights, made from reeds and tallow were used throughout Ireland until the advent of electricity.

Here in Bog Meadows beds of reedmace provide a perfect haven for wildlife. Do come and watch birds, dragonflies and bats feeding on the insects found here in summer.



4. Hawthorn - Uath

Beautiful but untouchable blossoms, hawthorn has deep associations with fairies and more in Ireland and beyond.

Known as the Fairy Tree or the May tree, hawthorn has been an enormously symbolic tree throughout the ages.

It was believed that it was a gateway between kingdoms and fairies “sidhe” live under the hawthorn tree.

As the fairies didn't like being disturbed, anyone removing branches or cutting down the tree would bring bad luck on themselves. It was also believed branches hung above a door protected the home from evil spirits, but only if cut during Beltane.

The Beltane festival in May celebrates the beginning of summer and hawthorn used in the celebrations has become a symbol for fertility and youth.

Come to Bog Meadows in May to see the beautiful flowers bloom becoming a fantastic resource for bees, then again in autumn when red berries provide food for birds and small mammals.



5. Blackthorn -Straif

Guarded by unfriendly, spikey moon fairies known as Lunantisidhe, Blackthorn was once known as a sinister tree associated with the dark side of the year.

It was said Lunantisidhe were unkind towards humans, cursing anyone who cuts wood from their tree. They only left the tree at Esbats (on a full moon) to pay respect to the moon goddess. So, this may be the safest time to cut the wood or pick the sloe berries.

Blackthorn is also associated with the goddess and ruler of winter, Cailleach. She emerges at Samhain to take control the year from the summer goddess, Brigid. She uses her blackthorn staff to create mountains, lakes, valleys and to bring about bad weather.

Blackthorn is also associated with overcoming obstacles for a better future, protection and hope in the midst of devastation.

The flowers appear early, before the leaves, and are a valuable source of food for bees. Thorny branches make a great nest site and sloe berries are a valuable autumn food for birds.



6. Hazel - Coll

In Celtic mythology there are stories of magical hazel trees beside a well which dropped enchanted hazelnuts into the water.

The hazelnuts flow into nearby streams where they are eaten by the salmon of wisdom. Those who consume the fish go on to gain psychic abilities. This is the story behind the Big Fish on the river Lagan.

Legendary heroes would venture on a quest to the well to catch a sacred hazelnut. It's said that Finn Mac Cumhail accidentally ate some of this salmon and became a great hero who is said to have built the Giants Causeway.

A fairy known as Bile Ratha, is the guardian of the hazel. Severe bad luck is cast upon anyone who cuts down these trees, once said to be punishable by death.

Hazelnuts were a valuable source of protein, where they were also ground into a nourishing flour.

They still have huge value for the wildlife here in Bog Meadows, in autumn you will find the nibbled nuts all over the paths. The leaves on the trees are great for caterpillars if you visit in summer look carefully to see the evidence of where they have eaten.



7. Oak - Dair

Oak has always been held in high esteem across all major cultures of Europe, often associated with the main deity.

Due to being tall and having high water content, oak are often hit by lightning and are associated with Thor, Zeus, Jupiter etc. the gods of rain, thunder, and lightning.

The word 'druid' comes from the Celtic knower of the oak "Duir", and they saw it as their most sacred tree.

The story goes that the Holly King and the Oak King personified a battle between the seasons. Holly being at peak power during the winter solstice and oak in the summer solstice.

During times of war, it was common to cut down the sacred oak of your enemy to weaken them and win the battle.

The value of an oak tree for wildlife cannot be overstated, they support more life than any other native tree. They host hundreds of insect species and provide acorns, food for numerous animals.



8. Elder - Ruis

Elder has many traditional and modern uses and a long history in Ireland.

Elder was seen as another sacred tree and it was forbidden to cut it down. It was highly respected by the Celts as it was said to protect them from evil spirits. Cradles were built from the wood to protect babies and elder bushes were planted around cattle to keep them healthy.

It was also believed that planting an elder near your house would protect it from lightning.

It's also known as the 'Judas tree' because legend has it that the traitor Judas Iscariot hanged himself from an elder bush. It then became associated with witches, stories of 'elder-witches' spread through Ireland. Leading to the idea that burning elder wood in your fire would summon the devil into your home.

Elderflower has a distinctive flavour making beautiful cordial and ‘champagne’ flowers can be dipped in batter and fried as ‘fritters’.

It has significant value for wildlife, acting as a food-plant for moth larvae, a nectar source for insects and an excellent source of fruit for birds in autumn.



9. Willow - Sail

Said to be the birthplace of the universe, willow has been a symbol of survival and rebirth throughout the ages.

Willow appears in the mythology of many cultures. Willow was connected to the goddess of death, revealing the dark parts of one's psyche. Willow leaves were worn as charms to protect against jealousy.

Druids believed the universe hatched from two scarlet eggs hidden inside a willow tree. One egg formed the sun, and the other, the Earth.

At the festival of Beltane this story was recreated by painting eggs. Today this is still part of Easter celebrations.

Willow is very valuable to wildlife supporting thousands of different organisms from bacteria in the soil, to fungi, frogs, insects, small mammals and birds to large mammals, raptors, and owls.



10. Ivy - Gort

Adorning the heads of Greek and Roman gods, Ivy is an important plant in both nature and folklore.

The Welsh associated ivy with their Lunar Goddess, Arianrhod.

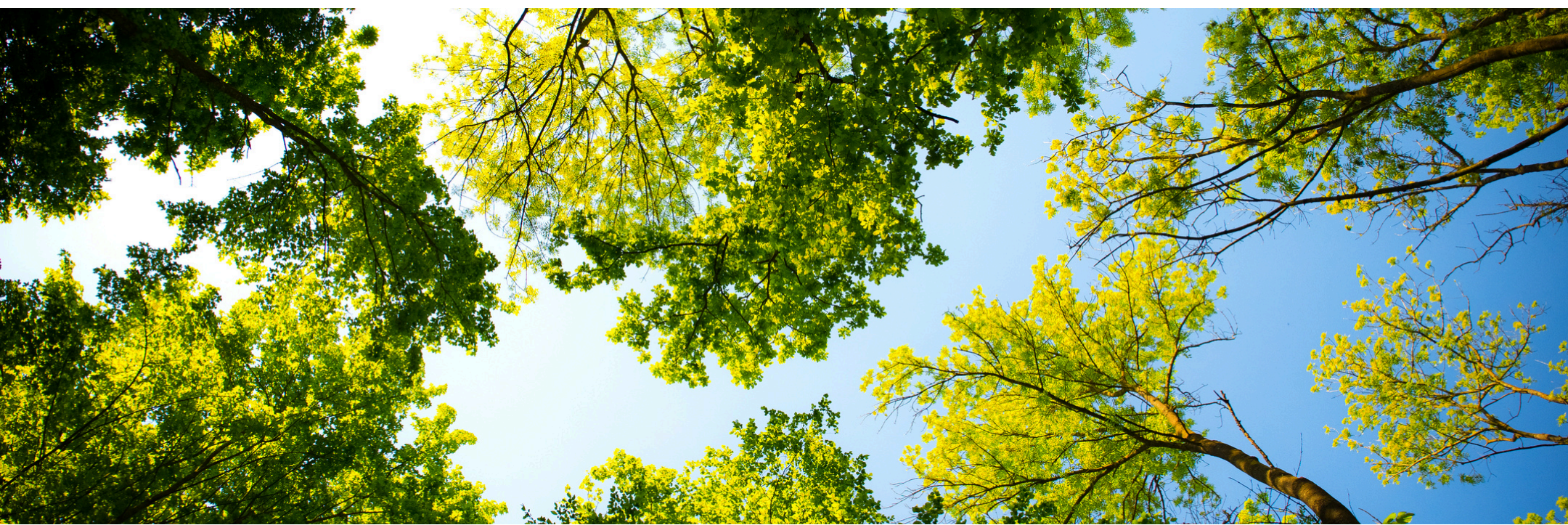
It is said ivy grew at the alter of Hymenaios, the Greek God of Marriage, and from this it has become a symbol of everlasting life, devotion, and loyalty.

Greek and Roman Gods of wine wore crowns of ivy as it was said to prevent drunkenness.

In Ireland people enjoyed having ivy near a house as it was thought to provide protection from evil.

Being evergreen it was an important symbol during winter and is still used in Christmas decorations today and as a symbol of fidelity in bridal bouquets.

Ivy has fantastic wildlife value providing food e.g. nectar and berries when other food is not available. Also shelter for a wide variety of animals, along with cleaner air.



This has been a snapshot across thousands of years of tree stories connecting our world with the realms of fairies, witches, and the heavens.

Stories illustrate the importance of trees to people in the past, they give us a window into the mindset of the people who told them and may help reconnect us with nature.

As we look forward and work to protect the trees we enjoy today, these old stories can connect us with the rich history of trees in Ireland.

Ancient people would be surprised by the lack of tree cover here now, one of the lowest in Europe. If you have a suitable space for a native tree - get planting.

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