BIRCH

Other names: Silver birch (B. pendula), Downy, Hairy or White birch (B. pubescens)
Origins: Spreads widely across Europe to Asia Minor and to the Arctic. Roughly, Downy birch is the more northerly tree in Britain but there has been much planting.

How to recognise it: The bark is red, pink and brown when young getting whiter with age and later develops black patches which build up from the base; it peels in characteristic thin sheets. Young twigs are thin and create a light, feathery and airy crown. Leaves are small, approximately oval, and thin with toothed edges and a more or less pointed tip. None of the easily seen characters readily and consistently distinguishes the two species of birch and they also interbreed - it is easier to treat them as one!

Limits of growth: Max. height: 30m  Max. girth: 4.1m+  Max. age: 80yrs
Life of the tree: Birch is strongly light demanding and a ready coloniser of bare ground anywhere; it outdoes other species on acid or peaty sites. The male catkins have the well-known lamb’s tail form, the female catkins stand up like green caterpillars and open in April; later the female catkins ripen and droop into the lamb’s tail position and break up in the autumn wind to release tiny double-winged seeds. The roots have an association with a nitrogen-fixing micro-organism and build up soil fertility.

Uses: Almost anything which can be made of wood can be made of birch but for so many things other species are often felt to do the job better and so it has been rather neglected. It is almost unique in the use of the fine twigs for brooms (besoms), and in being the source of a birch wine. The timber is is pale yellow and makes good furniture; it can be used for plywood veneer and for pulp. The rapid growth and tolerance of a wide range of conditions makes birch a useful tree for reclamation sites. Birches are attractive at all seasons and make a good amenity tree.

Plant classification: Magnoliidae (Dicotyledons)
BETULACEAE  Betula pendula  Roth. and
Betula pubescens Ehrh.

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