**BEECH**

**Origins**: Across central Europe to Turkey and Russia. Perhaps after the last Ice Age reached southern England only but introduced throughout Britain since.

**How to recognise it**: Distinctive in a variety of ways - smoothish dark-grey bark (often with green algae on it); very young leaves are pale green, translucent, more or less oval, and hairy edged, as summer progresses they become dark green and opaque and lose the hairs; leaves show fine autumn colours and stay brown, and hardly withered, on the young tree until the following spring; buds are cigar-shaped with pointed brown scales and alternate on slender zig-zag twigs; in full leaf the tree casts heavy shade and tends to have little growing beneath it; the green fruit turns brown with 4 stiffly hairy sections which open to show the 2 chestnut-brown fruits, triangular in cross-section. The common ‘copper’ beech variety has red-purple pigments in the leaves.

**Limits of growth**: Max. height: 46m+

**Max. girth**: 7.25m+ **Max. age**: 250yrs+

**Life of the tree**: Beech tolerates shade well and can readily regenerate under other trees (though rarely under itself) - seedlings scorch in bright sun and it is frost sensitive. Branch forks are rather prone to tearing off. Both rabbits and squirrels will nibble at the thin bark and can readily kill young trees. It flowers in May and a week or two after the woodland floor is covered in the discarded male flowers. Good seed (mast) years occur only every 3 to 5 years. The beech will grow on a very wide range of sites; leaf litter tends to make soils more acid.

**Uses**: In the past the mast was as important as the timber and there were many places where the common right of pannage for pigs provided autumn and winter feed. The timber is heavy and strong, pale-pink with many small flecks of brown. It makes fine furniture and turnery and is easily steam-bent, but needs preservative outdoors. Beech makes excellent clipped hedges.

**Plant classification**: Magnoliidae (Dicotyledons) FAGACEAE *Fagus sylvatica* L.