

HAWTHORN

Crataegus monogyna · Common hawthorn · May tree · Whitethorn · Quickthorn



LEAVES + THORNS



BLOSSOM + POLLINATOR



HAWS + LEAVES

A hedgerow tree with a big story. Hawthorn is food, shelter, medicine, folklore and habitat all rolled into one small, thorny tree.

IDENTIFICATION

Leaves: glossy green and deeply lobed, often described as looking a little like a tiny oak leaf. Flowers are white or pink-tinged, usually with five petals and a cluster of stamens, and appear mainly in May.

Fruit: small red haws, ripening from late summer into autumn. Common hawthorn usually has one hard stone inside. Twigs: slender and armed with sharp thorns. In winter, the thorns and buds make hawthorn easier to recognise.

Size & age: usually a small tree or large shrub, but it can reach around 15 metres. Individual trees can live for several hundred years.

FOOD & TRADITIONAL USES

“Bread and cheese”: young leaves, flower buds and very young flowers have traditionally been nibbled as a spring hedgerow snack. The leaves have a mild, nutty flavour when young and tender.

The autumn haws are edible but dry and starchy when eaten raw. Cooked, they make excellent jellies, syrups, fruit leather, vinegar and the famously rich hawthorn ketchup. Their natural pectin also helps jellies set.

Foraging note: haws are best processed rather than eaten in quantity raw. Don't chew or eat the hard stones. Only eat wild plants when you are completely confident of identification and have permission to forage.

HERBAL & MEDICINAL

Hawthorn has a long history in traditional herbal medicine. Flowers, leaves and berries have traditionally been prepared as teas, tinctures or extracts, especially in connection with the heart and circulation.

Hawthorn contains flavonoids and other polyphenolic compounds. Modern research has investigated its effects on cardiovascular health, but evidence is not strong enough to recommend self-treatment.

Traditionally, hawthorn preparations have also been used as a gentle tonic and to support digestion. The flowers and leaves are generally considered milder than concentrated berry extracts, which are more commonly found in modern herbal preparations.

Important: hawthorn can interact with medicines, including some used for the heart and blood pressure. It should not be used to replace prescribed treatment without professional advice.

A closer look at its practical, cultural and ecological life

MODERN & PRACTICAL USES

Hawthorn's dense, thorny growth makes it one of Britain's classic hedging plants. It can be clipped into a tight boundary or left to grow into a tangled, wildlife-rich hedge.

Its timber is hard, dense and fine-grained. Historically it has been used for small wooden objects, tool handles, turnery, walking sticks, firewood and charcoal.

Today hawthorn is valued particularly for nature-friendly planting. It copes well with exposed sites and is useful in new hedgerows, woodland edges and habitat restoration.

MYTHOLOGY & FOLKLORE

Hawthorn is strongly associated with May Day and Beltane — celebrations of spring, fertility and the coming of summer. Its blossom was used in garlands and decorations.

Across Celtic and wider European folklore, hawthorn became associated with fairies, protection and the Otherworld. In some traditions, cutting or damaging an old hawthorn was considered particularly unlucky.

There was also a widespread superstition against bringing hawthorn blossom indoors. Its unusual smell may have added to the sense that it was a tree belonging outdoors: warm blossom contains compounds including trimethylamine, which can produce a surprisingly animal-like scent.

HAWTHORN IN THE ECOSYSTEM

A whole food web in one tree. Hawthorn is especially valuable because different parts of the plant support wildlife at different times of year.

Spring: masses of blossom provide nectar and pollen for bees, hoverflies and other insects. Summer: the leaves support many insects and caterpillars, which then become food for birds.

Autumn & winter: the haws provide food for birds including blackbirds, thrushes, fieldfares and redwings, as well as small mammals. All year: the dense, thorny branches offer nesting sites and shelter from predators.

Wildlife fact: common hawthorn can support 300+ insect species. That makes an apparently ordinary hedgerow plant an important link in the wider food chain.

A TREE WITH A JOB TO DO

Hawthorn is a great example of multifunctional nature. A single tree can feed a person, feed insects, feed birds, provide a nesting place, form a boundary, store carbon, hold soil and carry centuries of stories.

And hedges matter. A mature hawthorn hedge is not just a row of plants. It can act as a wildlife corridor, connecting patches of habitat so that insects, birds and small mammals can move through the landscape.

ONE TREE — MANY ROLES

Food • Medicine • Hedge • Habitat • Firewood • Folklore • Shelter • Pollinator plant

Hawthorn is a brilliant reminder that the plants we walk past every day can have surprisingly deep relationships with people, wildlife and place.

Next time you pass a hawthorn, stop and look a little closer. Look for the thorns. Look for the insects. Look for last year's haws. And think about how many different lives are connected to that one tree.

Further reading: Woodland Trust — Hawthorn; Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew — Hawthorn; Royal Horticultural Society — *Crataegus monogyna*.

WILDERDAYS • Back to Nature