

These sheets offer some imaginative ways of looking at trees through stories, myths and legends. There are many other books and sources for this approach and each teacher probably has their own favourites. You may find the following list of common tree myths useful. Encourage the children to explore ideas from other cultures. Where appropriate, use the children themselves as a resource. They could, perhaps, find out information from their parents and other relatives.



APPLE – On Twelfth Night the “wassailing” ceremony is carried out to ensure a good apple crop. The felling of an apple tree was unlucky. Leaving the last apple on the tree meant death in the family.

ASH – The ash tree had magical powers that could cure a child of rickets. An ash tree was split in two and before sunrise the naked child was passed through the split which was then bound up and sealed with clay. As the trunk knit together, the child’s limbs healed. To cure a lame animal a live shrew was sealed up inside a hole in an ash tree. As the shrew died the animal got better.

BIRCH – A birch broom was held over the threshold of a house, then a navvy and his bride jumped over it and were then regarded as legally married. On May Day a birch tree bound with red and white rags was propped up outside a stable door to keep horses safe from being “hag-ridden” by witches or having their manes tied in knots by fairies.

ELDER – It was said that elder was used to make the Cross for Jesus and Judas Iscariot hanged himself from an elder. For this reason elder was thought to be unlucky in the house. It was also a witches’ tree and was dangerous if approached after dark. If you fell asleep under an elder tree the scent of the flowers poisoned you.

HAWTHORN – Hawthorn was the Holy Thorn planted by Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury. It could guard a house against storms, spirits and witches or guarantee a good supply of milk if hung outside the cow shed. Hawthorn was used to make wreaths for the Green Man, the spirit of the woods.

HAZEL – Forked hazel wands are still used by water diviners. They used to be used for pointing out criminals or finding metal underground.

HOLLY – Hedgers believed it was unlucky to cut holly. A holly hedge around the house protected it against poison, the evil eye, storms and fire.

JUNIPER – During the Great Plague burning juniper was supposed to drive away demons. It was unlucky to dream of juniper trees.

OAK – The oak was supposed to preserve youth, cure toothache and protect from lightning. An oak tree was supposed to shriek and yell when felled. An oak tree shielded Charles II after the battle of Worcester.

POPLAR – An illness with shaking limbs could be cured by pinning a lock of the sufferer’s hair to a poplar/aspen tree. The tree is supposed to tremble with horror because it was also said to have been used to make the Cross.

ROWAN – Rowan trees gave protection against witches or evil spirits. People wore crosses made from rowan and rowan twigs were tied to buckets of milk to keep the milk fresh.

WILLOW – Willow is the emblem of grief and lost love and it was unlucky to burn sawn willow.

YEW – Many Christian churches stand on the site of pagan yew groves, and yews in graveyards protect them from witches and evil. The yew tree is a symbol of everlasting life.