

Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) Sceach Gheal



Just as the flowers of the Blackthorn begin to fade the Hawthorn explodes into flower, matching the floral show of the Blackthorn in colour and intensity.

The Hawthorn and the Blackthorn are often mistaken for each other as they have similar flowers and are often found side by side in native hedgerows. The easiest way to tell which is which is as follows; The Blackthorns flowers come out first, followed by its leaves, whereas the Hawthorns leaves come out first which are then followed by its flowers.

The Hawthorn, by its Latin name *Crataegus monogyna*, is also known as Quickthorn, Whitethorn, the May tree or by its Gaelic name Sceach Gheal. It is one of the most common small trees/large shrubs grown in Ireland. It is sometimes grown as individual trees, but it is more common to see it grown in a closely planted row as a hedge or screen. It is the ideal candidate for this, as young hawthorn plants grow strongly with many thorny branches and side-shoots. This quickly forms a thicket, which makes for a virtually stock-proof hedge.

A bushy tree, Hawthorn grows on average to a height and spread of 6 metres and can live to well over 400 years.

Unlike the Blackthorn, whose stems are dark, the stems of the Hawthorn are light grey turning to a pinkish brown colour with age, which is also when characteristic filled cracks start to appear up along the trunk. Most of the young twigs sprouting from the tree emerge red before going through these colour changes.

The glossy green leaves are between 20 to 30mm long and are divided into 3, 5 or 7 deeply cut lobes. The tree comes into leaf at the end of March.

By September lots of red berries appear; these berries are known as 'haws'. Birds will feed on these through the winter and so can we, although they don't really taste of very much. They are dominated by a stone, which must not be cracked when eating the flesh of the berry, but they can be roasted and ground into a coffee substitute. The stone is often made up of several segments which tend to fuse together to appear as one. The berries are mostly used to make jams, and fruit leathers.

The Hawthorn tree is also one of the sacred trees of Wicca and Witchcraft, and is associated with "Beltane", the "May Day" spring celebrations. Beltane honours the Sun god Belenus whose festival originally commenced on the first day the Hawthorn tree blossomed. It was often referred to as the May tree because it traditionally flowered during the month of May, and its blossoms were used for Mayday decorations. Today, due to seasonal fluctuations brought on through climate change, it has been seen to flower as early as March and April, but Beltane is still celebrated on the 1st of May.

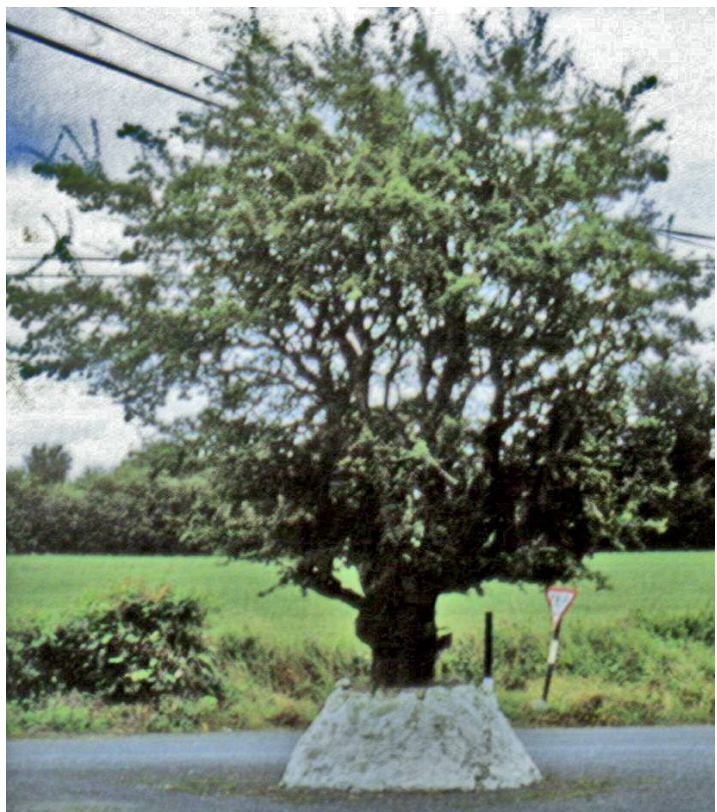
According to the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds), the Hawthorn provides food for over 150 species of insect, of which the sawfly, shieldbug and cockchafer all live in the tree itself. These as well as other carrion type insects fertilize the flowers, which lends the tree a suggestion of decomposition in its perfume.

Our native tree of the fairies



In Irish myths and legends, there are many references to Hawthorn or Whitethorn and its connection with the fairy folk. It was once believed that to place a sprig of fairy Hawthorn in your milking parlour would cause your cows to supply extra pints of creamier milk.

It is also said that fairies who gather around a thorn tree are thought to be earth spirits and as a precaution no evil thing is ever said of them for fear of retribution. The old belief that any damage done to their trysting tree will bring misfortune to the doer has not died out and farmers still laboriously cultivate around them. In several instances it has been impossible to persuade workmen to remove a thorn tree from the route of a new road or footpath (as the picture below of a Hawthorn from somewhere in rural Ireland clearly shows), and there is widespread belief that to cut a thorn would bring ill luck on the person 'injuring' the tree and possibly death.



The Rag Tree

Another appearance of the Hawthorn in Irish myths and legends is a Hawthorn known as St Ciaran's Bush. Ciaran was a fifth century saint who founded a monastery here.



Located at Clareen, east of Birr in the Midlands, the lonely Whitethorn is dressed in clothing rags (giving it its more impertinent name, the rag bush). It is believed that the bush cures illness and answers prayers, so when a piece of the persons clothing is placed on the bush, once the rag has rotted to nothing, their prayers and intentions will be answered. (It is also believed by some that the increase in the bush's use over the last few years is a reflection of the state of medical services in Ireland)

The tree does not appear to be particularly old, but it has been confirmed that the same bush has been decorated for at least 40 years. It is likely that the present tree replaced an older one.

The local people helped to preserve the tree when it was in danger of being felled due to the realignment of the road some years ago. It now stands on an island of grass, surrounded by low white railings, the old road on the west side and the new road on the east.



(Pictured left) An old Hawthorn tree left grow through the wall at St Doulagh's holy Well, near Malahide. The wall around the Hawthorn tree as carefully been maintained and repaired over the years to allow the tree to grow freely through the wall.

The Song of the May Fairy by Cicely Mary Barker

My buds, they cluster small and green
the sunshine gaineth heat
soon shall the hawthorn tree be clothed
as with a snowy sheet

O magic sight, the hedge is white
my scent is very sweet
and lo, where I am come indeed
the spring and summer meet.