



London
Wildlife
Trust

Beginner's guide to identifying trees

Learn to identify some of the trees
you see in and around London

Getting started

Did you know London is home to around 8.4 million trees, making it one of the world's largest 'urban forests'? Our guide helps you identify nine common trees found here. Whether you're in a park, garden, or one of our 36 nature reserves, keep an eye out for clues to spot these species!

1. Surroundings

Where a tree is located can tell you a lot, as some species like to grow in specific areas. Is it near woodland? Or perhaps in a park?

2. Season

Depending on the season will mean you will need to rely on different features to help you identify what species a tree is.

3. Size and shape

Size and shape of a tree can help you narrow down the species. Some trees, like silver birch, grow tall and narrow, whereas others, like oak, are wider.

4. Bark

When examining bark look at the colour, texture and any markings. Some trees have very distinctive bark like silver birch which is white and flaky.

5. Leaves and needles

Usually the most obvious feature of a tree, take note of the shape, texture, appearance and colour of the leaves.

6. Flowers

Spring is usually a great time for tree identification as many trees are in bloom, giving you even more clues as to what species it is.

7. Fruits and seeds

The fruits or seeds of a tree can vary dramatically. Some are smooth and soft, others dry and prickly. Some trees grow nuts or catkins, others berries.

8. Twigs and leaf buds

Winter can be a trickier time for tree identification, but looking at their twigs and leaf buds can give you some clues.

English Oak

The English oak is, perhaps, our most iconic tree. One of two native oaks in Britain (sessile is the other), both are prized for their wood and the wildlife they can support.

Where to spot: woodland, parks and gardens.

Bark: silvery-brown that gets ridged and rugged with age.

Leaves: lobed leaf shape, around 10cm long.

Flowers: yellow-green catkins.

Fruit: acorns - a green seed that sits in a small cup attached to the stem. Once ripened, it turns brown and falls to the ground.



Sycamore

The sycamore tree, often recognized by its tall, domed shape, is known for its distinctive "helicopter" seeds. These seeds emerge in summer and eventually turn brown before falling in autumn.

Where to spot: woodland, parks, gardens, railway linesides and hedgerows.

Bark: when young, its bark is smooth and dark pink-grey.

Leaves: its five-lobed leaves have toothed margins and characteristic red-tinged stalks.

Flowers: small, green and hang in tail-like clusters (called panicles).

Fruit: winged seeds known as helicopters.



London plane

London plane tree is a common sight in the city. Introduced in the 1680s, it has been widely planted since. These trees are tough enough to thrive in the city and many of them are among the largest in London.

Where to spot: parks, gardens and roadsides.

Bark: olive green or grey that flakes away and resembles camouflage.

Leaves: large with five triangular lobes. They look similar to sycamore leaves – but are much larger and papery.

Flowers: small and ball-shaped.

Fruit: spiky fruits hanging in strands with crimson stigmas that turn fluffy before they disperse.



Common beech

The common beech tree is iconic in southern Britain. In autumn, its golden-brown leaves cover the ground with nuts. Parks and gardens often feature a purple-leaved variety called copper beech.

Where to spot: woodlands, towns and parks.

Bark: smooth, grey bark.

Leaves: shiny, soft, oval leaves that are lime green in colour.

Flowers: male catkins are tassel-like and hang from long stalks. Female flowers are yellowy-green and grow in pairs.

Fruit: acorn-sized, hairy fruit that contains beech nuts.



Horse chestnut

The horse chestnut, is originally from south-east Europe. It is familiar to us as the 'conker' tree - its shiny, brown seeds appearing in their spiny cases in autumn.

Where to spot: farmland, woodland, parks, gardens and towns.

Bark: when young, the bark is smooth and pinky-grey. With age, it darkens and has scaly plates.

Leaves: hand-shaped, palmate leaves with five to seven toothed leaflets.

Flowers: In April and May, horse chestnuts bloom with stunning upright flower spikes, ranging from white to deep pink.

Fruit: spiny-shelled fruits contain reddy-brown conkers.



Hornbeam

Hornbeam is perhaps the 'tree of London', characteristic of many ancient woodlands, which were once managed to provide charcoal to fuel London prior to the 19th century.

Where to spot: woodlands, parks and streets.

Bark: greenish-grey, smooth, becomes twisted and cracked with age.

Leaves: ovoid, beech-like but serrated edge.

Flowers: male catkins hang from branches from late March before the leaves emerge.

Fruit: papery chandelier-like clusters, known as 'samaras', emerge in June, each tri-lobed bract holds a nut.



Ash

A common tree, ash has a preference for damp and fertile soils. However, many are now affected by 'ash dieback', a fungus that may kill up to 80% of British ash.

Where to spot: grassland, farmland, woodland, towns and gardens.

Bark: pale brown to grey, longitudinally ridged as it ages.

Leaves: compound leaves made up of seven to twelve leaflets.

Flowers: ash trees flower before the leaves appear in spring. Small and purple, they grow in spiked clusters.

Fruit: ash 'keys' are winged seeds that hang down in bunches and disperse in autumn.



Silver birch

A spindly tree, the silver birch is well known for its paper-thin, white bark. It is a 'pioneer species' and able to quickly spread in an area. An American species with whiter bark, paper birch, is often planted in new developments.

Where to spot: grassland, heathland, moorland, freshwater, wetlands, woodland, towns and gardens.

Bark: distinctive white and papery bark, which cracks with age.

Leaves: Its five-lobed leaves have toothed margins and characteristic red-tinged stalks.

Flowers: Long yellow catkins.

Fruit: in spring, the male catkins 'lamb's tails' turn yellow and shed their pollen, which is carried by the wind to the short, green, female catkins that appear on the same tree.



Hybrid black poplar

The hybrid black poplar, a variety of our wild species, has become naturalised in Britain. Native black poplars are now our rarest 'timber' trees; less than a hundred still stand in London.

Where to spot: freshwater, farmlands, wetlands, woodlands, towns and gardens.

Bark: grey-brown that can become ridged with age.

Leaves: rounded with a pointed tip that are dark green above and pale below, often giving the tree a silvery appearance.

Flowers: catkins flower in April. Males are magenta red and females are yellowy-green.

Fruit: female catkins transform into fluffy white seed heads in late summer.



About us

London Wildlife Trust is a driving force for nature conservation across the capital. With our dedicated supporters and volunteers, we work tirelessly to restore wildlife across London.

We take action every day to help wildlife flourish through practical conservation work; we engage, inspire and enable people to connect with nature; and through campaigns and consultancy, we give wildlife a voice.

We can't do any of this without our members and volunteers, who help make sure that nature can thrive across London, now and in the future.

Website: <https://www.wildlondon.org.uk>

Facebook: /LondonWildlifeTrust

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Scan the QR code to become a member today and help us restore London's wildlife.

