Silver birch

Latin name
Betula pendula

How to spot
The silver birch is one of the most recognisable UK native trees due to its stunning white, almost silver, bark. This papery bark peels and sheds layers just as humans shed their skin. In all trees the outer layer is constantly replaced with new growth. Generally, this is a slow process and is not visible to the naked eye, but silver birch trees shed layers much more visibly.

Fully grown silver birch trees can reach 30m in height with elegant, drooping branches. As the trees mature, the bark develops dark, diamond-shaped cracks and becomes black and rugged at the base.

Silver birch leaves are small, light green and triangular. They have serrated edges and turn yellow before falling in Autumn.

The flowers of the silver birch hang from the branches in Spring, gathered in long clusters known as catkins.

Where it grows
The silver birch is often planted as an ornamental tree in gardens and parks.

In natural areas you are unlikely to see a silver birch tree alone. They tend to appear as large groups, easily germinating from seed on well-drained soil in woodland clearings, downs and heaths.

The silver birch is known as a pioneer species because it easily populates new habitats.

A pioneer species is able to colonise new habitats quickly after a disturbance – the destruction of a wood, for example, or a heathland fire. They grow rapidly and produce many small, easily dispersed seeds that can germinate and establish quickly in bare soils.
Don’t confuse it with
Downy birch (*Betula pubescens*)
Look at the youngest twigs at the tips of the branches; silver birch twigs are smooth and hairless, whilst downy birch twigs are covered in soft hairs.

Why it needs protecting
Silver birch trees can be damaged by birch dieback disease, which is caused by fungus and often results in death. Trees grown naturally from seed appear to be less prone to this disease, compared with trees planted.

Benefits for wildlife
Silver birch trees provide food and habitat for more than 300 insect species. The leaves attract *aphids*, providing food for ladybirds and other species further up the food chain.

Silver birch trees provide habitats for many types of fungi including fly agaric and birch milk cap.

Woodpeckers and other hole-nesting birds often nest in the trunk of silver birch trees.

Did you know?
The silver birch tree can be used to improve soil quality for other plants to grow. Its deep roots bring otherwise inaccessible nutrients into the tree, which are recycled on the soil surface when the tree sheds its leaves.

Around 25% of hay fever sufferers are allergic to birch tree pollen, produced by the male birch tree. This is the first pollen to appear in the hay fever season in early Spring.

Get involved
Have you seen any peeling silver birch trees lately?
Take a photo to share with friends and [@GrowWildUK](https://twitter.com/GrowWildUK) online using #silverbirch and #NatureQuest.