



“European Mountain Ash” (*Sorbus aucuparia*)

This tree is more commonly known as the **Rowan** tree, and has long held a special place in the hearts of Celtic people. The wood is considered to offer the most powerful protection against enchantments. Wreaths of it were hung in the home to guard against evil, and sprigs were attached to the tops of pens to protect livestock. It was also a popular wood for making staffs as well as dowsing rods. In many Celtic societies there was a tradition that a very dark spell, called the “Cauldron of Rebirth”, brought dead soldiers back to a sort of half-life. The only way to kill these zombies was to run them through with a stake of Rowan.

The Rowan’s berries ripen in winter, and while they are poisonous to people, they are a food source for many birds. Celtic hunters could be pretty sure of bringing home some meat for their clans by visiting these trees during the darkest, hungriest months of the year.

The Rowan is the second letter (*Luis*) of the Ogham Alphabet.



“Juniper” (*Juniperus communis*)

While the Common Juniper is not represented in the Ogham Alphabet, it did play a substantial role in the daily life of Celtic people. The oil produced from the tree’s berries was highly prized as a medicine and for flavoring. It was also used by the Druids in a special potion to induce visions during certain ceremonies.

Juniper oil has antiseptic and antibacterial properties. In very small doses it once served to combat a variety of kidney and urinary complaints. This is a rather risky medicine though, as too much of this oil can cause serious damage to the kidneys. It was also widely used to clean cuts and wounds.

This will not come as a surprise to many in Northern Arizona, but the Celts also used Juniper as a favored wood for fires and cured their meat with its smoke. In addition to imparting a wonderful flavor to their food, the smoke was believed to repel evil spirits.



“Apple” (*Malus sylvestris*)

The dizzying array of apples you see at the grocery store are all descended from the wild apple. Anthropological evidence shows that this wonderful fruit has been cultivated in the British Isles since as far back as 3000BC, and it has played a large role in Celtic legend and everyday life. To the ancient Druids, the fruit was considered to be the ultimate food and filled with life-giving energy. The Celts of Wales actually referred to it as “the noblest of all trees.” Many scholars also believe that “Avalon” actually means “The Place of Apples”.

The technique of making hard cider stretches back millennia, and some believe apple cider may be one of the earliest alcoholic drinks. But in Brittany, Galicia, Cornwall, and Asturias the art of fermenting the apple reached its glorious apex. Don’t take my word for it: here at the Northern Arizona Celtic Festival you can try some for yourself!

The Apple tree is represented by the tenth letter (Ceirt) in the Ogham Alphabet.



“Birch” (*Betula spp*)

At one time Birch and Scots Pine forests covered most of the British Isles. The Birch tree is an early colonizer of disturbed land, and was probably one of the first trees to become re-established as the ice sheets retreated.

Because the Birch is one of the first trees to put on new leaves in the spring, it took on a special significance to the early Celts. It was considered a “maiden tree” that heralded the return of life after the long, dark winter. Birch twigs were commonly used to light the traditional fires of Beltane celebrations, welcoming the arrival of summer.

The bark and wood of this tree have long provided us with an excellent raw material for roofs, baskets, boats, and tools to name a few. The sawdust was very effective in smoking fish.

The Birch is the first tree (Beith) represented in the Ogham Alphabet.



“Willow” (*Salix spp*)

In Celtic mythology the Willow was closely associated with Brigit, the young maiden aspect of their triple-goddess. In the spring, Cailleach (the crone aspect of the triple-goddess) would come forth from her winter abode and drink from a magical well by the Willow. She would transform once again to a maiden and life would return to the land.

This tree has a long association with magic, dreams, and enchantment. It was said that witches preferred binding birch twigs to an ash handle with willow to make their brooms.

The bark of the White Willow (*Salix alba*) has long been used as a pain reliever and fever reducer, as it contains salicin. This chemical is synthesized into salicylic acid in the body, which is closely related to aspirin.

The Willow is represented by the fourth letter (*Sail*) of the Ogham Alphabet.



“Pine” (*Pinus spp*)

One of the most prevalent trees in the sprawling forest that covered the British Isles after the last Ice Age was the Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*). This towering tree produced a wood that was both strong and easily worked and provided early artisans with their principal source of wood. It is also the source of turpentine and its resin has long been used as a preservative. From the bark a very strong rope was made. After all the other parts of the tree had been used, its final gift was a long-burning charcoal.

These forests have disappeared, especially from Scotland, for a variety of reasons. But one of them was large scale clear-cutting following the defeat of the Jacobin forces at Culloden. Sympathizers of the Jacobin cause, even in England, would often plant a small Scots Pine near their farms as a symbol of their support.

For some unknown reason, no pines were represented in the Ogham Alphabet.



“Dogwood” (*Cornus spp*)

Two Dogwood species native to the Celtic lands are the Bloodtwig (*C. sanguinea*) and Cornelian Cherry (*C. mas*). The Bloodtwig’s name refers to dark red stems. The Cornelian Cherry does produce a small fruit which has long been used in jams, preserves, and even wine.

The wood of these trees is incredibly hard, which is illustrated by their Latin name, *Cornus*, which means “horn”. This fact has led to Dogwood’s being used to make a wide variety of tools, from pegs and wheel spokes to hoes and ax handles. In fact the name “dogwood” actually derives from the old Gaelic *daga*, which means “a pointed tool”. Additionally, Celtic people used the flowers of this tree to create a yellow dye.

Dogwood tends to be an aggressive colonizer and will quickly move into disturbed areas. The sprawling, dense thickets it creates make a difficult barrier to people (which is why it is still a popular hedge plant) but is terrific shelter for a variety of game animals.



“Brambles” (*Rubus spp*)

Many are the legends of a Celtic hero being trapped by a magical bramble patch, the gnarled vines grasping his arms and legs like talons. As any farmer or gardener who has tried to remove these wild plants can attest, no magic is really needed to make them a real pain. But once the fruit ripens – what bliss!

In Celtic regions the most common brambles are the Blackberry (*Rubus fruticosus*), Raspberry (*Rubus idaeus*), and Cloudberry (*Rubus chamaemorus*). The fruits of all three have long been used to make an amazing variety of wines, jams, and preserves. They have also served as medicines: their roots are very astringent and have served to alleviate diarrhea and dysentery; chewing of Blackberry leaves was thought to heal bleeding gums; and boiled Raspberries were mixed with mint and served to people recovering from jaundice.

Brambles represent the eleventh letter (Muín) of the Ogham Alphabet.



The OGHAM or “Celtic Tree” Alphabet

The Ogham (OH-yam) alphabet is an interesting study, but sometimes it is hard to tell where scientific knowledge ends and mythology (both ancient and modern) begins. What we do know is that a system of writing was developed in Celtic areas and recorded on a series of stones. Many of these stones are grave and boundary markings. There have been nearly 400 discovered so far, most in Ireland, Scotland, Isle of Man, and Wales, although a few have been found in Italy and Spain as well. The “consonant letters” in this alphabet may be one to five vertical or angled lines, while “vowel letters” are usually a combination of dots.

Each letter in this alphabet is named after a tree, so that the first letter is Beith/Beth (Birch), the second Luis (Rowan), the third Fern (Alder), and so on. Many times you will see this alphabet referred to as the “Beth-Luis-Fern” alphabet, just like we call ours the “ABCs”. The term “Ogham Alphabet” was coined because in Celtic legends it was their god of eloquence, Ogma, who gave his people the gift of this writing.

The majority of examples we have today of this writing date back to the early Christian era, although many Celtic scholars believe it was in use long before then. There is some evidence to suggest that Celtic Bards inscribed their tales on Poet’s Staffs using this script, and several ancient Celtic myths tell of Bards hiding or destroying their staffs so the tales would not fall into the wrong hands.

An interesting puzzle is that not all of the twenty trees used in the Ogham are to be found in the Celtic lands of the British Isles. Curtis Clark (www.csupomona.edu/~jcclark/ogham/ogh-orig.html) has done some interesting studies on this, and believes that the alphabet actually originated in the Rhine River valley, which is considered to be the Celt’s ancestral home.