



London
Wildlife
Trust

Beginner's guide to identifying trees

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

Getting started

There's nothing more satisfying than being able to identify the trees you see and London has lots of them! Around 8.4 million in fact, making it one of the world's largest 'urban forests'. This guide will give you lots of tips on how to get started and focus on nine trees you can find right here in London.

You can learn to identify trees all over London: in a park or garden, in one of London Wildlife Trust's 36 nature reserves or just outside your window.

When learning to identify trees look out for clues to help you figure out what species it is

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? Several species of willow, for example, like to grow near water.

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. In spring, many trees are in bud and bloom - but in winter you'll have to rely on bark, twigs or leaf bud. Knowing when a tree will flower can help with identification. Blackthorn, for example, blooms late in winter, and hawthorn flowers in late May.

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, have a wider, spread-out crown.

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 stone fruit or 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: the one that almost every child and adult alike could draw the lobed leaf of, or describe the acorn fruits of. 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

A tall, domed tree of woodlands, hedgerows and parks, the introduced sycamore is familiar to many of us as the “helicopter” producing tree - its large, winged fruits appearing in summer, then turning brown and dropping 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

The London plane tree is, as its name suggests, a familiar sight along the roadsides and in the parks of London. Introduced in the 1680s and widely planted since, it is tough enough to put up with city life. Many are some of the city's largest trees.

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

An iconic tree, particularly in the south of Britain, the common beech stands tall and proud in woodlands and parks. It turns beautiful golden-brown in autumn, strewn the floor with its 'mast' (nuts). A purple-leaved variety, copper beech, is often found in parks and gardens.

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

A tall, broad tree of woodlands, roadsides and parks, the horse chestnut, originally from south-east Europe, is familiar to many of us as the 'conker' producing 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, rows of horse chestnuts lining roads and in woodlands provide a spectacular display of 'candles' - large, upright flower spikes ranging in colour 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 around the capital such as Ruislip Woods, Epping Forest, Hainault Forest and the Dulwich Woods, and once managed to provide charcoal to fuel London prior to the 19th century. Ornamental conical shaped varieties, known as 'fastigate', have been widely planted elsewhere.

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 is familiar to many of us for its autumnal bunches of winged seeds, called 'keys'. With a preference for damp and fertile soils it can be found in woodlands, railway linesides and parks. 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.



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Silver birch

A spindly tree of heathland and acid grasslands, and dry and sandy soils, 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.



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Hybrid black poplar

The hybrid black poplar, a variety of our wild species, can be seen along riversides, roadsides and in parks. Used for ornamental planting and timber, it has become naturalised in Britain, often in different forms such as the towering spire-like Lombardy poplar. 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 protect 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/>

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