

DOWNY BIRCH *Betula pubescens*

LATIN EXPLANATION *Be*+*u*-*la*; the Latin name for birch. *Pube*-*es*-*sens*; covered with soft, fine hairs.

HEIGHT - Up to 25m(75ft) reaching maturity at about 60 years.

SOIL TYPE - Downy birch is found chiefly on acid soils, but prefers damper sites than silver birch, being found in fens, bogs, by lakes and in areas of high rainfall or impeded drainage. It is a very valuable tree for poorly drained areas, where the silver birch is less likely to succeed.

HABITAT - It withstands low temperatures well and grows successfully at higher altitudes than silver birch. It can be found from sea level to over 500m. It grows across most of Northern Ireland, often being found with alder and rowan. It is often the dominant vegetation until taller growing trees overtop it, when it soon dies out, not being able to survive in heavy shade.

SHAPE - With a single trunk it is similar to the silver birch but has much more erect and upright branches, lacking the distinctive pendulous branches of that species. The young twigs and branches are velvety with soft white hairs and without the white warts, found on the silver birch.

ASSOCIATED SPECIES - Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), alder buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*), bird cherry (*Prunus padus*), grey willow (*Salix cinerea*), guelder-rose (*Viburnum opulus*), honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*), pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*), sessile oak (*Q. petraea*), rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*), Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*).

DISTRIBUTION - Downy birch is widespread through northern Europe and Siberia. It occurs over the whole of the British Isles, but is more common in the north and west.

FLOWERS & SEEDS - The seeds are borne abundantly and it is able to colonise open ground with its quick-growing, light-demanding seedlings. It can grow in height by a metre a year. It hybridises freely with silver birch and plants with intermediate characteristics often occur. It can begin to produce seed when only fifteen years old and younger. Thereafter, it has a crop every year. Seeds are shed from September onwards.

INTERESTING FACTS

- Coleridge christened the birch 'The Lady of the Woods'. It is at once the most graceful, the hardiest, and the most ubiquitous of our forest trees.
- It penetrates farther north than any other tree, and its presence is a great boon to the natives of Lapland (for firewood, fodder, construction materials, etc).
- It will grow where subjected to great heat as well as extreme cold.
- In the far north it can be a mere shrub.
- The birch will reach maturity in half a century and, before the other half is reached, will have passed away.
- The bark of the birch is more enduring than its timber. This may be partly due to its habit of casting off the outer layer in shreds, like fine tissue paper, from time to time.
- Birch bark is used for tanning certain kinds of leather and the peculiar odour of 'Russian leather' is said to be due to the use of birch in its preparation.
- It is of little use as timber, but as a nurse crop to young timber trees it is of considerable importance.
- Birch was one of the earliest colonisers of these islands after the last ice age.
- Up to one hundred 'Witches Brooms' can exist on a mature Birch (caused by the fungus *Taphrina betulina*).
- One tree is capable of producing more than one million seeds.
- Birch does not build up a persistent seed bank.
- Several species of leaf weevil can defoliate individual trees.
- The most familiar use of birch is in the making of traditional broomsticks or 'besoms', demand for which now out-strips supply.

New growth on the silver birch is rough.

Downy birch, as its name suggests, has soft hairy new growth.

