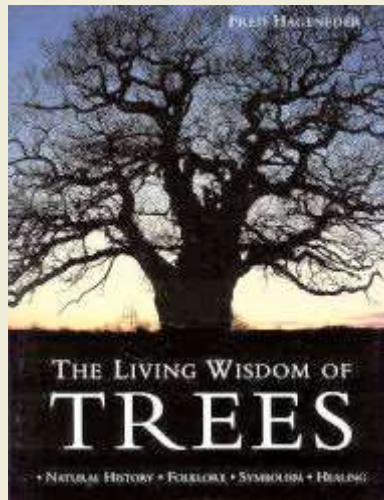


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### **YEW *Taxus***

A small genus of eight species of evergreen trees, *Taxus* is distributed throughout the northern temperate region and as far south as Central America and Sumatra. The eight species are very similar and there is a greater range within *T. baccata*, the common yew, than there are differences between the species. Hence, some botanists regard the other species as subspecies to *T. baccata*. Furthermore, with its red fruits and lack of resin, the yew is not a true conifer.

Yews are densely-branched trees. As solitaires their width is often greater than their height, which rarely exceeds 50 feet (15m). However, straight columns topping 100 feet (30m) have been reported in the mountain forests of Caucasia.

The needle-like leaves are ½in to 1¼in (1.3-3cm) long, dark green above and pale green beneath, and arranged in spirals or two ranks. The reproductive organs are situated in small roundish heads in the leaf axils. Male and female flowers open in early spring and are usually borne on separate trees. The seed is partly enclosed by a bright scarlet, fleshy cup called an aril. Birds are the main distributors.

Yews can send down so-called aerial roots to support the crown, and this can even be witnessed inside the hollow (or hollowing) trunks of many ancient yews. At first, a tender root grows downward through the crumbling old heartwood while it is decomposed by fungi. But over centuries, it can grow into a handsome new trunk that stands inside the hollow shell of the old one.



*The great longevity of the yew tree often leads to the loss of its heartwood, leaving a fascinatingly shaped hollow of huge girth.*  
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Yews grow extremely slowly – at about half the rate of many other European tree species. Slower-growing even than the protected trees in parks and churchyards are those in the wild - in forests or rocky areas, such as southern France. As trees in general die when they have outgrown themselves, slow growth is a recipe for long life, of which the yew, indeed, is a master.

The age of yews cannot be assessed easily, mainly because the trunks of almost all old trees eventually become hollow. This is not a sign of weakness or final decay: a hollow tube is much stronger and more flexible (for example, in high winds) than a solid one – every engineer knows this, and trees know it too. But unfortunately, the hollowing process destroys the “rings” that help us to discover trees’ ages. Furthermore, an interior root which grew for centuries in the hollowing old trunk will eventually develop into a firm new trunk that slowly takes over the supply of the crown. Many centuries later, when the old shell will have withered away, nobody will be able to guess that the apparently young tree had an entire lease of life before, and thus is at the very least a millennium older than its girth would suggest.

Nevertheless, there is a yew in Borrowdale (Cumbria, England) that has been proven “dendrologically” to be 1,500 years old. And Professor Pridnya, curator at the Caucasian Nature Reserve in Georgia, attests that yews can live in excess of 3,000 years. The Fortingall Yew in Perthshire, Scotland, is said to be the oldest tree in Britain, and probably Europe, at an estimated 5,000 years old.

### **Practical Uses**

All cultures have appreciated the qualities of the slow-grown, hard but flexible, fine-grained and water-resistant yew wood, also called “iron wood” because yew fence poles are said to outlast metal ones. When the original yew foundations of some buildings in Venice were replaced in the 1950s, the refurbished yew beams were sold to the building trade. The oldest man-made artifact (a spear thought to be c.150,000 years old) is of yew; so are the oldest musical instruments. In ancient Ireland, household items, such as bowls and spoons, were carved from Yew.

The Yew longbow goes back at least 5,300 years (one was found with the so-called “Alpine Iceman”), but made political history between the 13th and 16th centuries when skilled, professional archers won crucial battles for the English against Scotland and, particularly, against France. The yew stands of the British Isles were soon depleted, and the English monarchs began to import yew wood, first from Spain, then from the Hanseatic towns of the North and Baltic seas. The yew populations of Europe never recovered from this period of intense trade.

### **Natural Healing**

Every part of the yew, except the red aril, is poisonous because it contains taxicantin. Eating as little as 50 - 100 grams of chopped leaves would be fatal for an adult. However, taxicantin poisoning is very rare – all ten reported fatal cases in the 20th century were deliberate.

In the early 1980s, paclitaxel (formerly taxol), a substance derived from yew bark, was discovered to be a potent anti-cancer drug. After pharmaceutical companies had subsequently raided almost all the yew stands (*T. brevifolia*) in the United States, a newly-discovered method of part-synthesizing the drug from a related substance in the leaves saved the last trees. To meet worldwide demand, China has planted 2 million yews near Yantai in northeast China, and is presently planting another 5 million on the slopes of Sichuan, also partly as an anti-erosion measure.

### **Culture, Myth and Symbol**

Many ancient Celtic communities and tribes named themselves after the yew (for example, the Eurobones and the Eburovices in Gaul), which indicates the significant sacred status of this tree. The Ibero-Celts, native to Spain, got their name from merging with their non-Celtic neighbours, the Iberians (from *ibe* “yew”). These Celts were the first Celtic invaders of Ireland, the ancient name of which is *Ierne*, “Yew Island”. A second kingdom named *Iberia* also existed in medieval Georgia, Asia, where the yew is still today called the “Tree of God”.

In tenth-century Wales, the penalty for cutting down a consecrated yew was one pound – far more than most people earned in a lifetime. The consecrated trees in question are those found in churchyards. And these Christian churches were erected on sacred sites of the previous, pagan religion. In the British Isles, particularly in Wales, there are many small churchyards that still display a circular and sometimes elevated geography, which is even older than Celtic earthworks. These sites go back to Bronze Age tumuli or even Neolithic burial mounds. Indeed, the religious significance of the yew is as old as the Stone Age.



*A familiar sight in the British Isles: the venerable yew in the churchyard. This one is to be found in Dorset, England.*  
The Living Wisdom of Trees by Fred Hageneder © Edward Parker / Duncan Baird Publishers, London.

The 13th rune in the *old futhark*, the oldest Norse rune alphabet, is called *ihwaz* or *eiwaz*, both variations meaning "yew", and representing death and rebirth. A second rune for this tree, from a younger Scandinavian rune set, *yr*, is *identical* with the Stone-Age symbol for the roots of the Tree of Life. The Nordic Tree of Life, Yggdrasil, not only represents the central pole, the foundation and the unity of the universe, but is also connected intimately with the spiritual search for divine knowledge. In the Icelandic scriptures, the *Eddas*, Yggdrasil is described as a "winter-green needle-ash". Unfortunately, over the past few hundred years this has been interpreted as meaning that Yggdrasil was an ash tree. But the ash is *not* evergreen, *nor* has it needles. And, while the Nordic *ask* can mean "ash", it can also mean "sharp" or "pointed". So was Yggdrasil, in fact, a yew tree?

In myth, Odin, the god of wisdom, hangs himself from Yggdrasil's branches for nine days and nights, on a vision quest from which he brings back runes – the magical alphabet - to share with humankind. Odin climbing the Universal Tree is an exponent of the truth-searching shaman - a tradition found throughout Eurasia. But while the yew has disappeared from central Siberia, it still grows in western Asia. In Japan, too, the Yew (*T. cuspidata*) is connected with the creator gods and their abodes on mountain tops. Here, also, is it called the "Tree of God".

Yggdrasil denotes the "steed of Odin", but it can also mean "I-carrier" – the supporter of the conscious self. The oldest European names for the Yew go back to Germanic *iwe* (*iwa*), which is related to *ihhe* (*ihha*), the first person singular. And in Anglo-Saxon *ih* means both "I" (the conscious self) and the yew tree. Furthermore, *iwe* is even more closely related to *ewi* (in modern German, *ewig*), which means "eternal". Another Anglo-Saxon name of the yew tree, *eo*, stems from Old High German *eo*, also meaning "eternal" and "always". Somehow, the yew tree has always reflected eternal consciousness.

The Germanic peoples connected the Yew with the midwinter solstice on December 21st. The Saxons celebrated the three longest nights of the year as the *modraneht* - the "Mother Nights" – to pay respect to the dark and still womb of the Great Goddess who gives birth to everything on earth. The Norse celebrated the solstice over an even longer period – for the 13 nights of Yuletide.

By contrast, the Celtic calendar connects the yew with the festival of Samhain (November 1st), when the gates between the world of the living and the world of the dead were said to be open. The ancient Greeks, too, saw the yew as a gate to the underworld, and hence a guardian of the soul. Indeed, we find this association cross-culturally, and this is the reason why the yew has been such a familiar sight at ancient burial mounds and in contemporary graveyards alike. However, the yew is not the "tree of death", as some 18th- and 19th-century poets called it. On the contrary, it is the Tree of Life, and has been employed in various ways in burial rites to counter-balance the power of death.

In the history of religion, transformation and rebirth have always been the realm of the female aspect of God. In Judaic myth, it is Channa or Anna, who represents divine mercy; in Christianity, it is Mary, the mother of Jesus. In older religions, it is the many faces and names of the Great Goddess, whose associations with the yew can be easily traced. Her gifts are justice, compassion, forgiveness, contemplation, insight and inner peace.



*The yew at Ankerwyke is one of the most venerated trees in the British Isles. The Magna Carta, which formed the basis for the constitutions of many countries including the USA, is believed to have been sworn here in 1215. In 1992 environmentalists met at the site to assert the right of all creatures to live according to their natures.*

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In 2007, Fred Hageneder's **Yew – a history** was published by Sutton Publishing. It is an in-depth monograph of the yew tree in all its aspects – botany, ecology, natural history, art, religion and culture.