

Alder

Common Alders (*Alnus glutinosa*) belong to the Birch family *Betulaceae*. They are the only native Alder in Britain and Ireland and their spread has been slow over the last ten thousand years, due to their preference for damp conditions. They are also found in Europe, North Africa, Siberia, and West Asia.

Alders loves to grow in damp boggy places, such as wet woodland, marshes, and along rivers. As they reclaim these watery lands, they begin a process of transformation and new wild life moves in. Alders are monoecious, having male and female flowers growing on the same tree. Their red male catkins open in early spring and provide an early source of pollen for bees. Several moths feed on their leaves, which are also good animal fodder for goats, sheep, cattle and horses but not for pigs. In the autumn and winter the Alder's seeds provide food for birds, including siskins, redpolls and goldfinches.

Many mosses, lichens and fungi grow on Alders, due to their preference for damp conditions. Alders form a symbiotic relationship with a nitrogen-fixing bacterium called *Frankia alni*, which are found growing in their root nodules. The fungi make nitrogen available to the Alders and in turn the Alders provide the bacterium with sugars from their own process of photosynthesis. From their partnership and cooperation, they create fertile, nitrogen-rich soils, which benefit the Alders and the other surrounding plants and trees.

PART 1

Learning from Trees

Trees invite us to stand still a while, to soak up their company and share a little of their embedded wisdom and intelligence. By observing their flowers and fruit, the way they grow, their habits and habitat preferences, we absorb and internalise their core characteristics. We also experience them at a subtle, emotional or vibrational level and where our observations and subliminal experiences meet, a personality, archetype or signature picture emerges. This becomes our guide to a deeper understanding of the trees and what they have to teach us.

The Signature Picture of Alders

Alders' character is complex, but is easily accessed once you begin to spend time with them. Everything about Alders is *immediate* and *fertile*, from the outer manifestation of their flowers, leaves and fruit, which can be seen on the tree all at the same time, to their 'Otherworldly' feel, which can spin you on journeys within.

Alders have short lives, between sixty and a hundred years, much the same as ours, and it is as if they don't wish to waste a minute of it. Their male catkins can be seen beginning to grow the previous summer, and in the early spring, in February and March, they open fully and cast a characteristic red glow around the trees. It always makes me happy to see this, as it heralds the beginning of the new season and the stirrings of new life after the winter. Look for the female flowers too, which are smaller and also red, and grow in clusters at the ends of the twigs. Once pollinated, they grow into beautiful bright green cones, unusual amongst deciduous trees. Throughout the summer the Alder cones ripen, dry out and become dark brown and woody. In the autumn they open to release their abundant seeds into the wind. The seeds have tiny airbags to help them float away on water. The old cones cling to the tree throughout the winter, and along with the new catkins, give Alder trees a characteristic cluttered and busy look.

The Alder's signature picture is characterised by their *fast growth* and *love of watery ground* and although they are short lived their lives count, as they can have a big impact on the land and the soil. Alders are '*pioneer*' trees and *transformation* is at the heart of their signature. They will move into ground that is too wet for most other trees to grow in, transforming the environment and making it possible for other trees and plants to follow. Look out for Alder trees when walking the land, as their presence could mean hidden water or boggy ground.

Alders are also known as 'nurse' trees, as they benefit other plants and trees nearby by transforming the soil and improving its nitrogen content with the help of their symbiotic relationship with nitrogen-fixing bacteria, which attach themselves to the Alders roots. A lovely piece of woodland local to me is full of Alders, and has several springs running down into it. This makes it difficult to navigate most of the year because of the excess water running through it, and I imagine this was once just a marshy boggy place, and the Alders have been key to creating the mixed woodland we now know and love. It is rich with thriving ecosystems and a wealth of native flora and fauna and is a testament to the power of Alder trees to transform a landscape.

Alder *roots* play a significant part in their signature picture and are often characteristically prominent and exposed, especially where they grow along waterways. *Water* is part of the Alder's signature picture, bringing association with flow, reflection and the world within. This is balanced by their association with fire, through their characteristic red catkins, red shoots and red sap. *Fire* is the energetic counterpart to water, and is linked to their fast growth, boldness to begin and transformation.

Wet swampy Alder woods or 'carrs' were thought to be places of mystery and *otherworldliness*. The feeling of 'otherness' the trees evoke is part of their subliminal signature reminding us again to take note of the things we cannot see but can sense or feel, and the importance of what is happening below the surface, beneath our conscious and visual radar.

Alder Myths, Legends and Folklore

There are many myths, legends and folklore tales connected to our native trees. These have been handed down by word of mouth from our far distant past and stem from a time when the trees were central to people's everyday lives. This led to an intrinsic understanding of the deep wisdom of trees and country tree lore, and takes us further into understanding the core signature of each tree.

Many tales of *rebirth* and *magical transformation* are found in the myths, legends and folklore associated with Alder, which beautifully mirror and reflect the key qualities of Alder's signature picture. In Celtic legend Alder is linked to Finn MacCool, Fionn Mac Cumhail, or Fintan, a wise being who survived the great flood by living underwater. He had the magical ability to shape-shift into many guises, most often the salmon or a young woman, to gain access to hidden knowledge and ancient wisdom. Alders are associated with Bran the Blessed, another Celtic hero, who carried an Alder branch and was able to prophesy the outcome of battles. Bran used his body to span the river to raise his followers above the dangerous waters below, which links to Alders' use for the foundations of bridges. In the Celtic saga 'The Battle of the Trees', Alder was referred to as 'the battle-witch of all woods', suggesting a strong, powerful and magical force within this tree. It was used to make shields for battles, but ancient stories also hint at its use as a *magical and psychic shield*.

Alders are linked to the *Otherworld* and inner journeying, and they are known in myth and legend as faerie trees. They were protected from being cut down by their association with the Sidhe (*Shee* or *Si* in modern Irish), a faerie race who once lived alongside us, and retreated into a different dimension, outside of Time. It is said that they continue to be in contact with some humans and there are places where this contact is more possible such as the 'hollow hills' or burial mounds, and 'portal trees' such as Alder and Hawthorn, which come under their protection. In German legend, Alder was associated with Erlkonig, the Alder King, or Elf King, giving a sense of prominence and importance to this often over-looked tree. The Celts associated Alders with ravens, and the Druids associated them with foxes and significantly, in Norse mythology, Odin made the first woman from Alder.

The wind whistling through the tops of Alder trees was listened to when seeking guidance and for divination. Ritual flutes made of Alder were played for invocation and to inspire rebirth especially at the Solstices and Equinoxes, and were played at funerals and memorials for the same reason.

Alder Kitchen Medicine

Our understanding of each tree's signature deepens by direct contact with them as we seasonally collect their leaves, flowers, fruit and bark to use medicinally and in the kitchen. Our own medicine is activated when we trust the subtle experiences we have with them and follow our intuitive perceptions of their healing qualities.

Alder has a herbal signature that is linked to the tree's preference for damp watery places and is used to treat all damp conditions such as rheumatism and stiff joints. The bark of the Alder is an astringent, which has a drying effect where used, which is similar to the Alder's effect on the land. Its herbal action is cooling and soothing.

CAUTIONS None found - making it safe to use.

Alder Leaves

Alders are useful trees to know when out walking in nature. The fresh leaves can be put into your shoes for long distance walking, both to ease aching feet and to keep the feet cool. The freshly picked leaves can be rubbed on the skin as a natural insect repellent and used as a poultice to reduce swellings and inflammations. Simply pulp up a handful of leaves, moisten with water or spit and bind on to the place needing treatment. Replace frequently.

Alternatively the leaves can be made into an infusion, and poured into a bowl of hot or cold water to ease aching feet – an absolute treat after a day out walking! An infusion of the leaves also makes an excellent gargle for mouth ulcers. Collect and dry the leaves in the spring and early summer or make into tincture.

See Appendix - Infusions and Decoctions

See Appendix - Tinctures and Elixirs

See Appendix - Harvesting and Drying

Alder Bark

(Always be careful when taking bark, NOT to ring the tree or it will die. Take small patches only where they are easy to peel.)

Make a decoction of the bark as an external lotion for any inflammations or burns, to staunch bleeding, to treat rheumatism and to relieve stiffness in the joints.

To relieve aching joints make an infused oil or ointment using torn leaves, twigs and bark.

See Appendix - Infusions and Decoctions

See Appendix - Tinctures and Elixirs

See Appendix - Making Herbal Oils

See Appendix - Making a Herbal Ointment

Alder Craft

Working wood by hand puts you directly in touch with the signature qualities of the trees. Make a connection to the tree and the tree's core signature as you work. At a subtle level, your intentions, heart energy, and the tree's signature picture become embedded in whatever you make.

Alders have white wood, but when cut the sap turns the wood red and they appear to 'bleed'. This has given rise to many myths and legends associated with Alders and their magical powers. The wood of the Alder is fairly soft and porous, but underwater it becomes strong, oily, durable and water resistant. It is able to withstand rot and turns hard as stone. In the past Alder wood was used extensively for building boats, the foundations of bridges and buildings that had their foundations in water. Alder wood that has been immersed in peat bogs becomes permanently stained a reddish brown and is known as 'Scots Mahogany'. Alder's roots, root-knots and burrs are greatly sought after by craftsmen. Alder burrs can be cut from trees that have died and make beautiful magical cups when hollowed out

Alder's trunk and branch wood is too soft for building or furniture making and attracts woodworm. It does not burn well and is not used for firewood. Traditionally their wood was used for smoking fish and for other smoked food and Alders were once widely coppiced for charcoal making. This extends their lives and their old trunks can become bulbous and gnarled, with characteristic sprouts of red shoots at the base of the trunk. These thin sprouts can be cut between November and February when the sap is down, and used for weaving.

Alder Dyes

Alder yields many colours of dye. The catkins make a strong green dye associated with faerie, greenwood outlaws and foresters. The sprouting shoots cut in March create a cinnamon coloured dye. Twigs soaked with iron create a black dye, which was used in the past as ink for writing and drawing. Dyes from Alder can be used to dye other woods.

Growing Alders

Growing trees is something we can all do to help the environment. The regeneration of trees is a world wide effective and simple solution for increasing the Earth's oxygen levels, locking up the increased carbon in our atmosphere, reducing ozone pollution and increasing biodiversity.

From seed to sapling, from first shoots to full grown tree, aim to have a relationship with the trees you grow. Observe them, get to know their habits and preferences, engage with their life force and be open to them being engaged with yours! The journey to reconnection, wholeness and belonging starts here.

Collect Alder cones into a brown paper bag on a dry day in late autumn. Leave somewhere warm and dry and then shake the seeds from the cones into the bag and return the cones to the Earth with your thanks. Sprinkle the seeds

directly into pots. The seeds need high levels of light and need to be kept constantly moist to germinate. Alternatively cuttings can be taken in the autumn and placed outdoors in damp sandy soil, or kept in a shed with their ends in water through the winter and planted in damp soil in the spring. Young trees in pots need to be kept in a damp place and kept well watered. Unusual amongst young trees, Alders don't mind their roots sitting in water so keep a bowl of water under the pots.

Once the young trees are two years old they can be planted out between November and February. They prefer damp boggy conditions and plenty of light, but will tolerate poor soil. The Alder is the perfect tree to use for any reclamation scheme, especially landfill and spoil heaps. It will also help hold riverbanks together and reclaim boggy land.

See Appendix - Growing Trees

See Appendix - Planting Out Trees

Creative Alder Growing

Alders can be cut and coppiced time and again. Coppicing will create an interesting bulbous base and many new red-coloured shoots will grow from here. These are flexible and can be woven together.

See Appendix - Creative Tree Growing

See Appendix - Coppicing and Pollarding Trees

PART 2

Heal Ourselves ~ Heal the Earth

Our own healing and the health of the Earth are one and the same when we step into our sense of interconnectedness and right relationship with the Earth. As we walk alongside all life on Earth in mutual respect and partnership we naturally become Earth Activists, Defenders, Protectors and Restorers. The signature qualities of the trees help guide and inspire us to become catalysts for beneficial change.

The Signature Qualities of Alder

* Rebirth * Transformation * The Element Water * The Element Fire *
Inner and Outer Balance * * Mystery * Otherworld Journeys *

Alders are trees of rebirth and transformation. They help us to transcend beyond our surface reality, seek wisdom from within and birth new parts of ourselves. They are found growing wherever there is water and they sometimes reveal a hidden spring. Often the land around them is too boggy to get close to

them, but they are at their most accessible when growing along brooks and rivers. Once you have established a connection with Alders you can tune in to them remotely, whenever you need their intrinsic wisdom.

* Alders help us to experience ourselves as balanced human beings, able to listen to and activate both the fiery and the watery sides of our intelligence. Fire brings transformation through the spark of inspiration, the power of our imaginations, freedom of choice, willpower, and our ability to direct our actions through conscious intention. Our watery natures bring transformation through the power of reflection, a deeper connection to our feelings, the rising of our intuition, and expansion into our sixth sense. This is our inherent ability to 'sense' and 'know' things. It is not a logical place, but inspirational and alive with instinctive truths. A balanced fusion between these outer and inner modes of intelligence opens us to new levels of awareness and capabilities. We develop a quiet strength, and move into a new culture of inclusiveness and a deeper sensitivity and respect for all the interconnected life forms around us.

* Alder was known as the battle-witch amongst trees and they are our allies in these changing times. What might a battle-witch be in this battle with governments, corporations, and businessmen, those who are ignoring the environmental facts, and are holding on to power and control, to the detriment of the planet and the rest of life on Earth? A battle-witch to me is the eco activist or eco warrior, who knows how to work energetically to create change at a subtle level. Learning to work at an energetic level is the foundation of all healing work and transformational change. We can all learn how to direct focused thoughts and energy. All that is needed is the intention to do so and the ability to slow down our breathing and slip into a meditative state. We can all send healing, protection, and strength to where it is needed. We can put up energetic walls and conjure positive outcomes if we put our collective minds to it, and we can do this from where ever we are on the planet.

* Alder wood becomes strong and durable when immersed in water and was used extensively for building bridges over water, thus linking communities together. Look for where you can build bridges and heal separation both in your local and in your broader communities. Be aware of where your thoughts or energy may be negative, blocked or stuck, and work to transform this. Reach out with kindness, cooperation and generosity.

* 'Strengthening what lies beneath the surface' is a key to Alder's signature energy, and also a key to creating environmental change. Look beneath the surface for other ways to address our present ecological challenges. A shift in our thinking patterns creates changes that ripple through all our lives and those around us. Look for ways to experience a sense of communion and companionship with the natural world around you. Our separation from Nature reinforces our legacy of harm and destruction to the Earth. It is time to change the stories we tell ourselves as we begin to experience all life as sentient and interconnected. Look for aspects of your life where you are stuck in the old paradigm of seeing yourself as separate from the natural world around you.

Every day consciously affirm yourself as part of a great big beautiful interconnected world.

Make an Alder Tree Essence

Making and taking a tree essence puts you in touch with the vibrational, energetic, and healing signature of the tree. Choose an Alder tree that you are drawn towards, and preferably when it is catching the sunlight, make your tree essence.

See Appendix - Making a Tree or Flower Essence

Make an Alder Touchwood, Wand or Ogham Stave

An Alder touchwood, wand or Ogham Stave becomes your physical anchor to the qualities and guidance of Alder and will help you draw on the strengths and understanding of the tree's signature qualities. Work with Alder when you are seeking to transform the old and when you seek a greater balance between your inner and outer capabilities.

See Appendix - Touchwoods, Wands and Walking Sticks

See Appendix - Making Your Own Set of Ogham Staves

The Alder Tree Ogham

The Tree Ogham staves act as a bridge between our conscious minds and our unconscious. Collect and make your own set of Ogham staves from pieces of wood from the trees. When you feel you need some guidance from the trees, choose a stave at random and interpret the way forwards using your own inner wisdom and the intrinsic signature wisdom of the trees.

Alder is the third tree of the Celtic Tree Ogham
Fearn ~ the letter F

* Choosing the Alder Ogham stave is a call to change. Balance outer activity with inner sustenance so that you act from a place of love and compassion. The energy you put out becomes who you are and affects what happens next. The choice is always yours.

* Alder invites you to enter the inner timeless realms, to step into other aspects of yourself; to move from the world you think you know and to explore beyond the physical. Ask yourself how you might create greater balance between your inner and outer worlds. Trust your intuition and deep instinctive wisdom.

* Seek a firm foundation for your life as an eco warrior by recognising that your spiritual path is deeply entwined with your actions to protect the Earth. Learn to know when to conserve your outer strength and do healing and energy work, and when to step forwards and make the best use of your rational mind and practical skills. By placing equal value on both, you are stronger.

See Appendix - The Celtic Tree Ogham System

The Wheel of the Year

Each of the native trees has associations that link them with one or more of the Earth Festivals and offer opportunities for us to engage with the trees at a deeper level.

Spring Equinox

The Spring Equinox, when day and night are equal in length is a perfect moment to meditate with Alder on the nature of balance, and explore what is out in the open and what is hidden beneath the surface. This is the fertile time when trees and plants begin their great outer growth cycle, so ask yourself what do you wish to make fertile at this time. What new paths call you? What new projects might bridge both your outer skills and your inner longings?

Tree of Balance

1. Draw a tree with an equal amount of branches to roots. Keep it simple
2. Add fruits, flowers and leaves, again in a simplistic style.
- 3 Name the branches, leaves, flowers and fruit as activities you do that make you feel well, happy and fulfilled.
4. Then name the roots as the things you do that nurture and strengthen you, keep you grounded and rooted to the Earth, and feed your spiritual path.
5. Look at how these inner and outer aspects to your life are balanced. Write on the trunk where your outer and inner selves unite. These are your strengths..
6. How can you bring your inner and outer skills together to help the Earth heal her fractured ecosystems? We all have our parts to play. Small actions can have larger consequences as a simple idea can spread like wild-fire. Align your self to be part of the Earth's support system through all that you do, think and say. Money is power. Become an ethical consumer. Support the things that you know will help the Earth regenerate and restore and leave behind old habits and goods that are causing harm.

Balance is never static – it is always in a dynamic state of equilibrium and flow. Repeat yearly to see what has changed.

Beltain

Beltain is the perfect time of year for energy work, when growth is rapid and manifestation is often immediate. Our imagination is a powerful tool that we have been taught to dismiss, but is an essential and natural aspects of our

intelligence, helping us to receive from our store of inner wisdom and the collective subconscious, and 'send' energy, intention and healing. In myth and legend, Alders are known as portal trees and as entrances to the Otherworld. This is the world within our subconscious. Not a place to be feared but to explore. Around the time of Beltain when all of Nature is bursting out into leaf and blossom, myths and legends tell us that this interface between the worlds is thin, making this an ideal time to seek guidance from within.

Journeying with Alder

Some trees feel conducive for journeying with. You will know when you meet them, as it is easy to naturally slip into a daydream state when you are with them. More often than not, they are the trees that our folklore tells us are faerie trees, such as the Alder, Elder and Hawthorn. To journey is to slip out of time and everyday reality, to access some of what is rising from the deeper layers of your psyche.

1. Sit or stand with your back against a tree and gently reach out to make contact. Follow your out-breath down from the tips of the branches all the way down to the imagined roots of the tree and beyond... Follow your in-breath up from the tips of the roots, to the tips of the branches and beyond... Continue with this rhythmic breathing and visualisation until your breath and thoughts slow down and you to enter a semi-trance state, conducive to receiving insights from your subconscious.

2. You can either journey down into the roots of the tree to enter the lower world or up into the branches to enter the upper world. Usually this just happens naturally. You might take a specific question with you or be open to the wisdom that unfolds. Trust what happens in your minds eye, and the encounters and the strong thoughts that come to you. This is the journey.

3. The moment to shift back into normal reality usually comes naturally – a bird-call, a extra deep breath, an awareness of other things around you. Give thanks to the spirits and return the way you came. Again, trust what feels right. Always thank the tree afterwards and ask if there is anything you can do to help it. Give space and time to listen.

4. Anchor your energy with food and drink, sharing a little of this this with the tree and visiting wildlife. Write down any insights you received while they are fresh in your mind, and add the date and location to your writing. Deeper layers of understanding may be revealed later.

See Appendix - Shamanic Journeying with Trees

See Appendix - The Wheel of the Year

It's Spring Equinox and I wake early. Looking out of my window, a huge full Moon hangs in a sky of deepest blue, tinged with a faint pink... Excited, I quickly get up, wrap up warm and get out into the pre-dawn half-light of a beauty-filled frosty

morning. The birds are beginning their morning songs as I walk up the lane to find higher ground so I can see the Sun when it rises.

Suddenly there is an intense brightness peeping between the trees! It is always such a thrill to see the Sun as it rises but this morning it is totally magical; a fiery riot of orange and pink, which lights up the grey frosty landscape as the Sun's rays spread across the land. I am filled with wonder and delight, entranced by the simple but astounding beauty of the Earth and the Sun in their morning dance.

Looking back, the big full Moon is still there... Low on the opposite horizon! Sun and Moon in perfect balance! This is why I like getting out early! And it is Spring Equinox - a magical moment when night and day are equal in length, when both aspects of ourselves are in balance, inner and outer, intuitive and rational, female and male. From this point onwards the sunlight will gradually increase, spring will take hold and the outer aspects of life will be more dominant. I stand in deep stillness and appreciation, surrendering my whole being to this special morning, and this moment.

Walking back across the fields, the Alder trees by the brook catch my eye; their deep red catkins mark them out and create a hazy red aura around them. I set off down the field to visit them. Halfway there they suddenly become ablaze as the golden rays of the rising Sun reaches them. It takes my breath away! Mists are rising from the valley bottom, bringing an otherworldly feel to an already magical morning. I wander along and greet the many Alders growing along the brook until I find one I can sit with that is catching the warming rays of the Sun. I easily slip into a trance-like state, and momentary shifts in perception take me on journeys in my mind. I catch these fleeting images and thoughts and wonder at their significance... I feel very blessed as I sit here in the early morning sunshine on this special Equinox morning, watching the brook flow by and the birds and insects going about their morning business.

Before I leave, I take out the three yellow ribbons that I have brought for my Spring Equinox moment. I tie them loosely to an Alder branch: one with my intention to be of service to the Earth; one with my intention to find ways to bring this into my community; and one for myself: For Balance. As I sit in stillness I receive the thought to do my morning meditation outside in Nature, and develop my receptivity to the natural world around me. I resolve to get outside before dawn more often.

I give heart-felt thanks to the Alder and this special moment we have shared and set off back up the hill for breakfast.

Extract from Walking With Trees by Glennie Kindred