



Birch brings eye-catching bark colour and texture to winter gardens. *Betula albosinensis* 'Bowling Green' is one of many named selections.

GAP PHOTOS / CAROLE DRAKE

CHOOSING

THE BEST BIRCH

Much loved for their graceful appearance, particularly in winter, *Betula* are fine garden trees with an appealing range of bark colours. Here are 12 good selections to consider

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Few trees have as much winter impact as birches – it is hard to think of any others with wintertide charms more impervious to cold and wet. Their glorious bark, so often pristine white but also pink, copper, near-red or glossy brown, places them at the top of the pile, but most are also of elegantly slender form. Birches are probably the thinnest-twiggled, smallest-leaved of commonly grown trees, giving lightness to their leafy crowns and delicacy to the tracery of their winter canopies. They are also beautiful in spring as their young leaves expand and the airy crowns are draped with catkins, while in autumn most have golden yellow leaves.

Birches are often grown as specimen trees (which can

be multi-trunked) but, where there is space, they are also seen to advantage planted in groups of three or more so the trunks diverge as they grow. This looks better than an 'orchard-like' planting of evenly spaced trees.

Birches for the garden

The best known, and probably fastest growing, is *Betula pendula* (silver birch) which occurs from the west of Europe to eastern Asia and Japan. This is a short-lived tree, its usefully attractive life probably in the range of 20–30 years in most areas; older trees develop corky trunks, shed twigs and branches and can become infected by fungi. Most other species such as *Betula utilis* and *B. ermanii* are slower growing and decorative in the garden for >>

LENTICELS ON BIRCHES

Lenticels are markings on bark made of porous cells that allow gases to pass between layers of tissue. On birches they appear as transverse streaks, often in a contrasting colour to the bark and contributing much to the trees' charm.

Betula growing advice

❖ **Overview:** birches are usually quick-growing, slender trees with decorative bark and appealing form, especially in winter.

❖ **Soil:** not fussy – they grow in most soil types, acid or alkaline, and even tolerate ground prone to occasional waterlogging.

❖ **Size:** height to around 20m (66ft) by 10m (33ft) across, but usually rather less.

❖ **Garden position:** birches need plenty of light and are unsuitable for growing under

other trees. As their usual grafting rootstock is shallow rooted, many herbaceous plants may struggle to do well below them, but spring bulbs and particularly cyclamen will usually thrive.

❖ **Water requirements:** these trees like plenty of water after planting but will withstand some drought once established.

❖ **Hardiness:** most are exceptionally hardy to H6 (-20°C / -4°F) or H7 (colder than -20°C / -4°F).

❖ **Maintenance:** minimal; may benefit from having their canopies lifted; see box, pp60-61.

❖ **Pests and diseases:** older trees can be susceptible to fungal attack; also birch rust and birch leaf mining sawfly may occasionally cause problems.

❖ **Planting:** birches do not transplant easily; plant bare-root trees only when small. Pot-grown plants should establish easily as long as they are well watered after planting.



Betula pendula 'Tristis'

- ❖ **Mature size:** height (H): 20m (66ft), spread (S): 10m (33ft).
- ❖ **Foliage:** leaves to 7cm (3in) long, blue-green developing yellow tints in autumn.
- ❖ **Bark:** silvery-white and smooth to the base.
- ❖ **Habit and appeal:** graceful, tall birch with weeping branches. Not for small gardens.
- ❖ **Other comments:** a good choice as a landscape tree where there is space. Do not confuse with lower-growing *B. pendula* 'Youngii', which has a spreading rather than erect crown. Holds an RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM).

Betula utilis 'Bhutan Sienna'

- ❖ **Mature size:** H: 15m (50ft), S: 10m (33ft).
- ❖ **Foliage:** leaves up to 10cm (4in) long, glossy, dark green and deeply veined with yellow autumnal tints.
- ❖ **Bark:** bright red-brown, peeling freely.
- ❖ **Habit and appeal:** fine birch with superb bark and a lightly spreading crown.
- ❖ **Other comments:** collected by a Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh trip to Bhutan, where this reddish bark is a local characteristic. Many *Betula utilis* are slower than *B. pendula* and make smaller trees.

Betula utilis var. *jacquemontii* 'Grayswood Ghost'

- ❖ **Mature size:** H: 15m (50ft), S: 10m (33ft).
- ❖ **Foliage:** large, glossy, rich green leaves to 12cm (5in) long, often turning bright yellow before falling.
- ❖ **Bark:** among the whitest of all birches.
- ❖ **Habit and appeal:** a vigorous selection with dazzling white bark, best seen in winter. Leaf cover is quite dense in summer.
- ❖ **Other comments:** originates from a tree in the garden at Grayswood Hill, Haslemere, Surrey. Holds an AGM.

Betula ermanii 'Grayswood Hill'

- ❖ **Mature size:** H: 15m (50ft), S: 10m (33ft).
- ❖ **Foliage:** glossy, rich green leaves to 10cm (4in) long and wonderful, reliable golden yellow autumn leaf colours.
- ❖ **Bark:** particularly beautiful: peeling creamy white, tinted orange with pinkish lenticels.
- ❖ **Habit and appeal:** choice, strong-growing but slender tree, best in autumn and winter.
- ❖ **Other comments:** desirable tree with fine autumn tints and bark. Originating from a plant of unknown origin at Grayswood Hill. Bark may take five years to colour well. Holds an AGM.

Betula utilis 'Park Wood'

- ❖ **Mature size:** H: 15m (50ft), S: 10m (33ft).
- ❖ **Foliage:** handsome, shiny leaves, yellowish in autumn, to 10cm (4in) long.
- ❖ **Bark:** attractive, smooth, peeling dark-chocolate bark with contrasting large whitish lenticels.
- ❖ **Habit and appeal:** desirable tree forming a light canopy and has unusual bark colour.
- ❖ **Other comments:** probably derived from a collection by EH 'Chinese' Wilson in the early years of last century and grown at Hergest Croft in Herefordshire.

Betula dahurica

- ❖ **Mature size:** H: 20m (66ft), S: 12m (40ft), usually less in UK cultivation.
- ❖ **Foliage:** rounded leaves to 7cm (3in) long, turning yellow in autumn.
- ❖ **Bark:** peels as small individual 'curls' with a whitish outer surface, red-brown within.
- ❖ **Habit and appeal:** the 'shaggy' bark gives a curious look, especially in winter sun. Deep rooted and drought tolerant once established.
- ❖ **Other comments:** introductions from Korea and Japan do better in the UK than those of continental east-Asian origin. Cultivars 'Maurice Foster' and 'Stone Farm' were grown from Japanese seed by the late Kenneth Ashburner.



Betula utilis 'Forest Blush'

- ❖ **Mature size:** H: 15m (50ft), s: 10m (33ft)
- ❖ **Foliage:** leaves are distinctively small and leathery to 10cm (4in) long.
- ❖ **Bark:** beautiful and smooth, creamy, tinged with pink with well-marked lenticels.
- ❖ **Habit and appeal:** ornamental selection of slender stature and lightly spreading crown.
- ❖ **Other comments:** derived from George Forrest's collection number 19505, introduced from Yunnan in southwest China in 1920 and grown in the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. Forrest described the bark of the wild tree as 'red'; trees in cultivation are paler. Holds an AGM.

Betula albosinensis 'China Rose'

- ❖ **Mature size:** H: 10m (33ft), s: 8m (26ft).
- ❖ **Foliage:** rather delicate; oval and soft green to 7cm (3in) long.
- ❖ **Bark:** attractive, coppery red and smooth with little white bloom (powdery coating).
- ❖ **Habit and appeal:** splendid, quick-growing red birch with lightly spreading crown.
- ❖ **Other comments:** a selected seedling from seed sent by Chinese forestry authorities from the province of Gansu, which gave rise to trees with a variety of bark colours. Several have since been named and propagated. Holds an AGM.

Betula utilis 'Nepalese Orange'

- ❖ **Mature size:** H: 15m (50ft), s: 10m (33ft).
- ❖ **Foliage:** glossy, rich green leaves to 12cm (5in) long.
- ❖ **Bark:** copper coloured, peeling and marked attractively by lighter-coloured lenticels.
- ❖ **Habit and appeal:** attractive and unusual birch with a typical slender habit.
- ❖ **Other comments:** a selection originally made by the late Kenneth Ashburner from a batch of seedlings he raised from seed collected by Len Beer, Roy Lancaster and Dave Morris in east Nepal in 1971. Not a good tree for cold or exposed regions.

Betula utilis 'Mount Luoji'

- ❖ **Mature size:** H: 15m (50ft), s: 10m (33ft).
- ❖ **Foliage:** glossy, rich green leaves to 12cm (5in) long.
- ❖ **Bark:** rich coppery colour, peeling in scrolls with some bloom.
- ❖ **Habit and appeal:** a good and choice ornamental tree featuring unusual rich bark colour and producing slender growth.
- ❖ **Other comments:** the original tree of this fine selection is at Stone Lane Gardens in Devon and was grown from seed collected by Lord Howick from Mt Luoji in Sichuan province, China.

Betula utilis var. *jacquemontii* 'Inverleith'

- ❖ **Mature size:** H: 15m (50ft), s: 10m (33ft).
- ❖ **Foliage:** large, elliptic-ovate leaves to 12cm (5in) create a dense canopy and have yellow autumn tints. Hairy young shoots.
- ❖ **Bark:** smooth, striking creamy white.
- ❖ **Habit and appeal:** a popular, freely available selection. The bark begins to colour up well at smaller trunk diameters than most other birches.
- ❖ **Other comments:** probably identical to *B. utilis* var. *jacquemontii* 'Silver Shadow'.

Betula albosinensis 'Pink Champagne'

- ❖ **Mature size:** H: 15m (50ft), s: 10m (33ft).
- ❖ **Foliage:** delicate; oval and soft green to 7cm (3in) long.
- ❖ **Bark:** smooth, peeling and a beautiful pale pink colour, softened by a persistent white bloom.
- ❖ **Habit and appeal:** has paler bark than many other so-called red birch, but a similarly slender shape forming a lightly spreading crown. Quite a quick-growing tree.
- ❖ **Other comments:** an appealing selection raised from the same batch of seedlings as 'China Rose'.

« longer, but some cultivars have denser, 'heavier' leaf canopies. Many birches with attractive bark have prominent lenticels (see note, p58).

Most trees of named cultivars are grafted, often on *B. pendula*, and so have shallow, dense root systems. Though naturally trees of light, often sandy soils, these birches can be grown on almost any soil and are remarkably tolerant of drought and waterlogging as well as exposure.

The best way to appreciate birches, especially beautiful, recently named cultivars, is to see them growing in their glory – a visit to Stone Lane Gardens in Devon, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, Ness Botanic Gardens near Liverpool or Wakehurst in West Sussex, among others, is a marvellous introduction to these characterful trees, and of course a fine way to help you to select a few for your own garden. ●

❖ There are numerous birch in the Arboretum at RHS Garden Wisley.

Keeping your birch in

To produce a tree with 'clean' bark, it is often best to prune off lower branches while they are quite young. This helps keep the branch scars relatively small and inconspicuous as horizontal grey markings – rather than the black, inverted, V-shaped markings found around the base of thicker branches. It is important that pruning of all but the smallest twigs is done when the tree is in full leaf: cuts made in late winter and spring as the leaves are developing will cause excessive bleeding of sap and weaken the tree.

Before the onset of winter, white-barked trees in prominent

good order

locations can have their trunks washed with warm water (right) to remove any excessive algae build-up. Avoid peeling off bark by hand, as this may damage the tree.

The birches described in this article are all relatively fast growing; sadly it is common to see silver birches in gardens crudely pruned, their tall branches lopped and the elegant, slender shape irreparably spoiled. Rather than prune in this fashion, it is usually preferable to remove the tree altogether and replace it with a young one. This will need to be done about every 15–20 years.



More from the RHS For the top five trees for winter bark: www.rhs.org.uk/plants
❖ See Books, November, p106, for Mark Flanagan's review of *The Genus Betula* by Kenneth Ashburner and Hugh McAllister.

SUPPLIERS

Many birches in this article are listed in *RHS Plant Finder 2013*. Specialist suppliers include:
❖ **Stone Lane Gardens**, Devon: 01647 231311; stonelanegardens.com
❖ **Junker's Nursery**, Somerset: 01823 400075; www.junker.co.uk
❖ **Pan Global Plants**, Gloucestershire: 01452 741641; www.panglobalplants.com