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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ew 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-twigged, smallest-leaved of commonly grown trees, giving lightness to their leafy crowns and delicacy to the tracery of their winter canopies. They are also trees, giving lightness to their leafy crowns and delicacy much to the tree’s charm.

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 useful attractive life probably in the range of 20–30 years in most areas; older trees develop coky trunks, shed twigs and branches and can become infected by fungi. Most other species such as Betulutilis and B. ermanii are slower growing and decorative in the garden for 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.

Bark:

- B. pendula: black to gray-brown, peeling freely. 
- B. utilis 'Bhutan Sienna': chocolate bark with contrasting large tissue. On birches gases to pass between layers of 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 tree’s charm.
- B. ermanii: bright red-brown, peeling freely. 
- B. utilis 'Park Wood': white, tinted orange with pinkish lenticels.

Foliage:

- Betula utilis 'Park Wood': handsome, shiny leaves, yellowish in autumn, to 10cm (4in) long.
- Betula ermanii: large, glossy, rich green leaves to 10cm (4in) long, often turning bright yellow before falling.
- Betula utilis var. jacquemontii 'Grayswood Ghost': large, glossy, rich green leaves to 15cm (6in) long, often turning bright yellow before falling.

Other comments:

- Betula utilis var. jacquemontii 'Grayswood Ghost': undesirable tree with fine autumn tints and bark. Originating from a plant of unknown origin at Grayswood Hill. Bark may struggle to do well below them, but spring bulbs and particularly cyclamen will usually thrive.
- Betula utilis 'Park Wood': attractive, smooth, peeling dark-chocolate bark with contrasting large whitish lenticels.
- Betula ermanii: desirable tree forming a light canopy and has unusual bark colour.
- Betula utilis var. jacquemontii 'Grayswood Ghost': 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 ACO.
- Betula utilis 'Park Wood': desirable tree forming a light canopy and has unusual bark colour.

Maintenance:

- Betula utilis var. jacquemontii 'Grayswood Ghost': desirable tree forming a light canopy and has unusual bark colour.
- Betula utilis 'Park Wood': desirable tree forming a light canopy and has unusual bark colour.
- Betula ermanii: desirable tree forming a light canopy and has unusual bark colour.

Pests and diseases:

- Betula utilis var. jacquemontii 'Grayswood Ghost': desirable tree forming a light canopy and has unusual bark colour.
- Betula utilis 'Park Wood': desirable tree forming a light canopy and has unusual bark colour.
- Betula ermanii: desirable tree forming a light canopy and has unusual bark colour.

Planting:

- Betula utilis var. jacquemontii 'Grayswood Ghost': desirable tree forming a light canopy and has unusual bark colour.
- Betula utilis 'Park Wood': desirable tree forming a light canopy and has unusual bark colour.
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* 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 canopy. Other comments: 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.
There are numerous birches in the Arboretum at RHS Garden Wisley. A fine way to help you to select a few for your own garden. 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, the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, or Ness Botanic Gardens near Liverpool or Wakehurst in West Sussex, among others. The Genus Betula described in this article are all relatively fast growing; sadly it is common to see silver birches in gardens growing; it is better to remove the tree altogether and replace it with a young one. This will need to be done about every 15-20 years.

Betula utilis 'Nepalese Orange'
- 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: a selection originally made by the late Kenneth Ashburner from a batch of seedlings he raised from seed collected by Len Beet, 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: 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 Lord Howick from Mt Luoji in Sichuan province, China.

Betula utilis var. jacquemontii 'Inveralith'
- 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 utilis 'Pink Champagne'
- Mature size: h: 15m (50ft), s: 10m (33ft)
- Foliage: delicately oval and soft green to 7cm (3in) long.
- Habit and appeal: ornamental tree featuring unusual pink colour, softened by a persistent white bloom.
- Other comments: has paler bark than many other so-called red birch, but a similarly slender shape forming a tightly spreading crown.

Keeping your birch in 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 cruelly 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.

Betula albosinensis 'China Rose'
- Mature size: h: 15m (50ft), s: 10m (33ft)
- 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 Yunnan in southwest China in 1920 and named cultivars, is to see them growing in their glory – a visit to Stone Lane Gardens in Devon, the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, or Ness Botanic Gardens near Liverpool or Wakehurst in West Sussex, among others. It 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.
- Keeping your birch in good order
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- The birches described in this article are all relatively fast growing, sadly it is common to see silver birches in gardens cruelly 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.

Betula albosinensis 'Pink Champagne'
- Mature size: h: 15m (50ft), s: 10m (33ft)
- Foliage: delicately oval and soft green to 7cm (3in) long.
- Bark: smooth, peeling and a beautiful 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 tightly spreading crown.

Betula utilis var. Jacquemontii 'Inveralith'
- 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'.

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