

The Birch Project
Guidance for Schools and Community Planting



The Birch Project started in Sussex in 2019, planting Birch trees salvaged from heathland habitat conservation. These trees are special, having local provenance, from ancient woodland. There are two native Birch species, Silver Birch (*Betula Pendula*) with weeping shape, and Downy Birch (*Betula Pubescens*), upright, with downy leaves and stems. They cross and hybridise. The local trees are mostly Downy Birch.

Birch is second only to Oak for supporting biodiversity. Many small birds; goldfinches, siskins, sparrows and blue tits, are attracted to Birch, to feed from the seeds, catkins and insects. Attractive all year, Birch only casts dappled shade, has minimal leaf litter, takes little space, grows fast and is easy to manage. The ideal tree for community planting schemes and gardens. They need to be planted in full light, not shaded.

The Birch Project lifts trees from October, and they need to be planted as soon as possible, before April. We avoid plastic and chemicals in planting, if need be we reuse salvaged plastic guards and ties or bioplastic, but generally use recycled wood stakes and natural twine or webbing ties. The trees are about 1m high, so generally do not need guards for rabbit protection etc.



Single trees can be planted, in groups, in corners, fence lines (right), between car parking bays, create a small copse of maybe 10-50 trees, or even a “Tiny Forest”. Birch make good street trees, parks, gardens, car park, and site planting to hide bins etc., maybe with a Holly as evergreen screening. Viewing the school on a Google maps satellite image (right), may help planning and as a printed worksheet, a stimulating starting point for school habitat mapping. We



are happy to offer help and advice, on site as need be. For schools without green space, we have devised a “Forest in a bag”, a compact woodland habitat of key species, enabling ecology field study in the smallest space, made from recycled materials. Other habitats could be created.



Birch are shallow rooting, but should not be planted within 5m of drains, buildings or walls. They can be planted with a few



trees of other species, such as the odd Holly, Rowan or Cherry, but typically grow in clumps or thickets as a Birch copse (small wood). We have also planted large areas, with Birch and scattered oaks, as Oak-Birch woodland (left). They are well suited to gardens, casting dappled shade, can easily be pruned to limit height or spread (right, pruned and not) and can be cut down with DIY tools at about 10 years, on a rotation, to produce new shoots as “coppice” which will grow on to mature again for another 10 years, fixing carbon dioxide all the way. Coppicing like this is traditional forestry. The logs can be used for craft projects or stacked for habitat and carbon storage.

Planning. Birch only need a minimum of space. As long as they are pruned as needed, they can be as close as 1-2m from a path or boundary and apart, pruned occasionally to control spread, height or overhang with loppers or telescopic pruners. They can be crown pruned just by sawing or pruning the leading stem, at the desired height, as low as maybe 2-3m high, from a short ladder. They will bush at that height (right). They can be left to grow to maturity if there is space. They can be harvested, maybe one tree in ten, each winter, in a rotation, at say 7-10 years growth, to provide variety of height and to encourage woodland wildflowers, with a hand saw or DIY reciprocating saw (a large jigsaw). It doesn't need a chainsaw or tree surgeon if managed this way, safely with a rope to guide falling branches, with DIY protection. A community forestry group would likely assist and it would not be a major job if engaging a gardener, or tree surgeon.



Planting. Strong boots should be worn. Depending on the soil, a small spade is usually all that is needed, a child could likely manage this if well supervised. A hole is dug, big enough to plant 75mm deeper than the original soil level on the stem to help resist drying out, the bottom broken up. The tree is placed in the hole and a stake set between the roots, then, avoiding damaging the tree and observing safety, hammered in about 75-100mm until reasonably firm. The soil is returned, the tree can be jiggled a little to help the soil work around the roots. When filled, the soil can be “heeled in” around the tree, quite firmly, leaving a deep heel imprint above the roots to direct rain water to the roots.

The tree can be tied to the stake with about 1m of thick natural sisal string. Tie the middle of the string tightly to the stake, tie tight again at the other side of the stake then loop each side of the string several times round the tree stem, slightly loose, not tight, then round the stake again and tie a double knot as neatly as possible, between tree and stake if possible. Non-recyclable food cardboard (e.g pizza box) weed mats work well (right).



For large trees, a webbing tie and a thick stake may be needed. Bramble can be used on rewilding sites, to tie, and spiral round stems to protect, if needed.

If a recycled plastic guard is used, this can be threaded over the tree and stake and tied through the guard holes with string. Be sure to recover plastic guards after a year or two, to reuse.

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