

Downy birch *Beith chúlumbhach*



Conservation Volunteers
Northern Ireland

Betula pubescens



DESCRIPTION

A fast-growing deciduous tree growing up to 15m (45ft). The young twigs are velvety with soft white hairs. The trunk is bronze when young, white when mature.

It has both male and female flowers on one tree. The female flowers are small erect catkins, while the male are long and shed their pollen in April. The seeds maintain the female catkin shape and are distributed by the wind in August and September.

It is found chiefly on acid soils, and prefers damp sites, being found on bogs, by lakes and in areas of high rainfall or impeded drainage. It withstands low temperatures well and grows successfully at altitude.

PROPAGATION

The seeds should be collected in August and September as the catkins are turning brown. Lay them out somewhere warm and let them dry out and disintegrate into hundreds of tiny seeds. They should be stored cool and dry over the winter.

In the spring, soak the seed for 24 hours, drain and mix with moist sand. Place in a loosely sealed container in the fridge for four weeks. Sow the pre-treated seeds on seed-beds or in trays. Keep moist and they will germinate very quickly.

INTERESTING FACTS

- Downy birch quickly colonises open ground with its light-demanding seedlings, as it did at the end of the last ice age.
- It can produce seed when only a few years old.
- Downy birch supports a wide diversity of flora under its canopy.
- A popular use of birch is in the making of traditional broomsticks or 'besoms', demand for which now outstrips supply.
- Up to one hundred *witches broom* can exist on one tree (caused by the fungus *Taphrina betulina*).

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