

## Leprechaun Trees

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My earliest memory of St. Patrick's Day is how angry it made my mother, who holds dual Irish-American citizenship and strongly identifies with her Celtic roots. It was not the day itself which got her Irish up, so to speak, but rather the way it was depicted in popular culture: Green-beer drink specials at the pubs, and St. Patrick's Day sales, all endorsed by grinning, green-clad, marginally sober leprechauns.

Although Mom stuck to the facts about Ireland and its history, my aunts would sometimes regale us kids with stories of the fairy-folk, including leprechauns. Those little guys gave me nightmares. According to my relatives, you did not want these little guys endorsing your breakfast cereal. They might look cute, but if you pissed them off – which reportedly was not hard to do – they were likely to kidnap or cripple you, steal your baby out of the crib, or even worse. And one of the surest ways to incur their wrath was to cut down their favourite tree, the hawthorn.

Native to Europe and northern Asia as well as to North America, it is a slow-growing, short-maturing (5-9 metres) tree with prodigious thorns, which are strong enough to puncture tractor tires. Experts disagree on the number of species (hawthorns, not tires) worldwide, but estimates range from hundreds to thousands. To be on the safe side, many references simply designate all hawthorns as *Crataegus spp.*

Since they cannot tolerate shade, they are often found in fencerows and pastures, where lucky specimens may survive for a century or more. It is these large, older, solitary hawthorn trees which have often been associated with fairy-folk in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England, and other parts of western Europe having Celtic roots. Even today in many places, local laws protect hawthorn trees from being razed for road work or other development, and it is not hard to find people who still feel it is bad luck to cut down such a tree.

Many cultures around the world have a long tradition of various “little people.” Oftentimes each type will look after a certain habitat, or even a specific plant or animal species. None of the available fact sheets on hawthorn mentions leprechauns or other little folk, so I am not sure why the Celtic faeries were so touchy about this tree. Perhaps they liked its fruit, or felt safe among its thorns, but I suspect it is because hawthorn protected them against heart disease, thus allowing them to live the unnaturally long lives they were reputed to enjoy.

A member of the rose family, hawthorn is related to apples, juneberries, and raspberries, so it is not surprising that its fruit is edible. Hawthorn berries, sometimes called thorn apples, haws, or haw apples, vary from tree to tree in terms of palatability. Haws are good for making jelly, in fact I make some most every fall. At times they have been an important food source for native peoples and pioneers as well. Hawthorn wood is hard, and is prized for making tool handles, as well as firewood.

Hawthorn blooms in May, when pastures and meadows are festooned with the brilliant white blossoms. These fragrant and attractive flowers have a rich history, dating back possibly a thousand years, of medicinal use as cardiac tonic. Today, hawthorn flowers, along with the leaves, are dried, powdered and made into capsules, and also packaged as tea.

As western culture supplanted, and in many cases obliterated, indigenous cultures, Native wisdom was often discounted and ridiculed. While this trend has not yet reversed, it has certainly slowed these days, as more and more “folk remedies” are proven by science to be effective. Ginkgo, St. John's-wort, quinine and digitalis are just a few examples of traditional medicine vindicated through research.

While hawthorn hasn't yet been endorsed by the Canadian Medical Association, studies have shown

that it does have beneficial cardiac effects. An article in the July 2002 issue of the *Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing* stated that hawthorn "...consistently demonstrates its ability to improve exercise tolerance and symptoms of mild to moderate heart failure." Numerous other studies, including a large-scale 2008 meta-review of past hawthorn research, have come to similar conclusions.

You can plant your own hawthorn, which is sure to attract pollinators and birds, if not faeries. Some cultivars such as 'Paul's Scarlet' have pink petals, and others like 'Winter King' hold their fruit long into the winter. More importantly, a number of thornless varieties are available; for example 'Ohio Pioneer.' A hawthorn will establish easily, and is tolerant of a wide range of soil types and pH, as well as drought. Even if you do not ingest any of its flowers or leaves, watching songbirds nest in its branches and eat its fruit is likely to do your heart good.

Fables can be thorny to interpret. The catastrophe which inevitably befalls those who try to chase a leprechaun to the rainbow's end to steal his gold is a cautionary tale against get-rich-quick schemes. Perhaps the portent against hawthorn removal is because its flowers are important to our health. On the other hand, maybe it's just to spare us from irate leprechauns, and sharp thorns.

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