

Blackthorn

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Blackthorn bush near the White Horse of Uffington, August, 2003

Species: *Prunus spinosa*
Family: *Rosaceae* (Rose family)
Ogham: *Straif* (ST), a Chieftain Tree
Scots Gaelic: *Draighionn*
Irish Gaelic: *Draighean*
Welsh: *Draenen ddu*
Astrological Rulers: *Saturn and Mars*

The Blackthorn tree is esoterically known as both the *Mother of the Woods* and the *Dark Crone of the Woods*.

Description

Type: Blackthorn is a *deciduous* tree, it's leaves turn yellow in autumn and fall off in winter, leaving a stark twisted black skeleton.

Location: Found throughout the British Isles, Blackthorn dwells on the edge of woodlands forming dense thickets and hedgerows, often with Hawthorn and Elder. I found Blackthorn growing along the sacred Ridgeway near Wayland's Smithy, and on the path leading to the White Horse of Uffington.

Size: The Blackthorn "tree" is actually more like a large shrub, with dark twisted branches, which can grow to twelve feet in height. Traditionally, it is said that Blackthorn never exceeds thirteen feet.¹

Bark: "Rough and scaly, and bright orange just under the dark gray surface."²

Branches/Twigs: The thickets are dark, dense and thorny, the branches and twigs twisting and branching out in all directions. The sapwood is light yellow and the heartwood is brown.

Thorn: The tree bears wicked long sharp thorns, which if pricked, can turn septic.³

Flower: The tree bears musk scented small, delicate, white flowers with oval petals clustered into a star shape in early spring⁴. The blossoms, which are thin and rounded with toothed edges, appears before the leaves in early March, and bloom for several months. They are usually white, but occasionally pink, with red tipped stamens.⁵

Leaf: Small dark green oval leaves which turn yellow before they fall off in winter⁶,

Fruit: Small blue-black, sometimes deep purplish, round globular berries in the summer, ripening after the first frost.⁷ The sloe berry juice can be used for ink or a strong red dye.⁸

Commercial uses: The wood is mainly used to manufacture walking sticks and Irish *shillelaghs*. The berries are harvested for sloe gin and fruit jam. It also has medicinal uses.

Medicinal Uses

The Blackthorn's fruit, the sloe berry, ripens and sweetens after the first frost. Tasting the berry in August, I found it to be extremely bitter. An alcoholic drink, *Sloe Gin* is made from this small dark blue berry, which is used both medicinally and magically. This

¹ The Wisdom of Trees, page 122

² Celtic Tree Mysteries, page 165

³ The Spirit of Trees, pages 185

⁴ Tree Wisdom, page 79

⁵ The Wisdom of Trees, page 122

⁶ Tree Wisdom, page 79

⁷ The Wisdom of the Trees, page 122, Tree Wisdom, page 79

⁸ The Wisdom of the Trees, page 126

berry has been found in archaeological sites from the Mesolithic and Iron Age periods (8000-2700 BC), proving that the blackthorn berry was a part of early man's diet.⁹

Sloe berries are very tonic *bitters*. They are astringent, and stimulate the metabolism, clean the blood, and are used as a laxative and diuretic. They help with indigestion, eczema, herpes, allergies, colds, catarrh, neurosis, weak heart, kidney stones, skin, bladder, and prostate problems. They disperse toxins.¹⁰ In 17th and 18th Century, sloes were brewed as a purgative to treat "fluxes in the belly."¹¹

"The fruit and leaves of Blackthorn contain tannins, organic acids, sugars and vitamin C. Steeped in boiling water, the flowers have a mild diuretic, tonic and laxative properties. The dried fruits are used to treat bladder, kidney and stomach disorders. The liquid from the boiled leaves can be used as a mouthwash for sore throat, tonsillitis and laryngitis. It is also good for circulations, blood strengthening, and nutrient absorption." (*The Wisdom of Trees*, page 127)

Green Man Tree Essences: "Blackthorn – Circulation. Helps absorption of energies necessary for life. Stabilizes emotions. Brings hope and joy. Stimulating."

"The leaves can be boiled into a decoction that, once cooled, is an excellent mouthwash and gargle for those suffering from tonsillitis or laryngitis. It can also be used as a soothing eye bath. A tea made from the powdered bark has a calming effect on the nerves." (*Celtic Tree Mysteries*, page 166)

They can be prepared as a juice, syrup, jelly, jam, wine or sloe gin beverage. They are excellent when combined with apples in a jam.¹² Try making a blackthorn tincture, with a sloe gin base!

Folklore

Blackthorn is depicted in many fairytales throughout Europe as a tree of ill omen. Called *Straif* in the Ogham, this tree has the most sinister reputation in Celtic tree lore. The English word "strife" is said to derive from this Celtic word. A long hard winter is referred to as a *Blackthorn Winter*.

To Witches, it often represents the dark side of the Craft. It is a sacred tree to the Dark, or Crone aspect of the Triple Goddess, and represents the Waning and Dark Moons. Blackthorn is known as "the increaser and keeper of dark secrets".¹³

⁹ The Spirit of Trees, pages 185-188

¹⁰ The Spirit of Trees, page 187

¹¹ Tree Wisdom, page 82

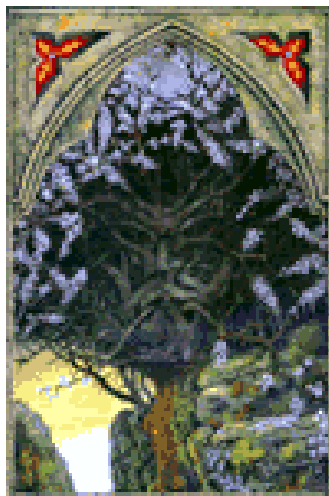
¹² The Spirit of Trees, page 187

¹³ Tree Wisdom, page 82

The tree is linked with warfare, wounding and death, associated with the Scottish *Cailleach* – the Crone of Death, and the Irish *Morrigan*. In Scotland, winter begins when the *Cailleach* (also the Goddess of Winter) strikes the ground with Her Blackthorn staff.

According to Christian folklore, Blackthorn is seen as a sinister tree and associated with Witches. Blackthorn was often used for “binding and blasting.” A *black rod* is a Blackthorn wand with fixed thorns on the end, used to cause harm to others. In British folklore, a Witch will use a Blackthorn *stang*¹⁴ in rituals of cursing. The sharp thorns were reputedly used by English witches to pierce poppets in their curses, called the “pins of slumber”¹⁵. In South Devon folklore in England, Witches were said to carry Blackthorn walking sticks, with which they caused much local mischief. Witches and heretics were burned on Blackthorn pyres. The Devil was said, in Medieval times, to prick his follower’s fingers with the thorn of a Blackthorn tree.¹⁶

Blackthorn is also associated with Witchcraft in Scotland. In 1670, in Edinburgh, Major Thomas Weir was burned as a Witch along with his most powerful magical tool - a Blackthorn staff, carved with a Satyr’s head, which was said to have fantastic powers - it was even able to fly through the air. Major Weir claimed that he received this magic staff from the Devil, but it is more likely that he obtained it while he served as an officer under General Leslie in Ireland. The Major was a pious Covenanter, and people came from miles around to hear his sermons. He was considered the “Saint of West Bow”, until one day in 1670, instead of his usual sermon, he confessed years of debauchery with his sister, Jean, to the congregation. Brother and sister were both tried and condemned to death. His ghost, along with the infamous Blackthorn staff, is still said to haunt the Edinburgh West Bow district.¹⁷



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¹⁴ Thumbstick, with forked top

¹⁵ Tree Wisdom, page 81

¹⁶ The Green Man Oracle, page 76

¹⁷ Famous Edinburgh Crimes, pages 17-22

¹⁸ Green Man Tree Oracle, by Will Worthington



The Irish cudgel is called a *bata*, or more popularly, a *shillelagh*, (named for the Shillelagh forest near Arklow, in County Wicklow). Every young boy was trained to defend himself with this Irish fighting stick. Although sometimes made from Oak, Ash or Holly, the shillelagh is usually made from Blackthorn, which is hard, strong, plentiful, and has a convenient “knob” formed from the root of the shrub. The black bark is especially tough. The wood was cured by burying it in a dung heap or smearing it with butter, then placing it in the chimney.

Blackthorn can be used in spells of protection as well. In Irish tales, heroes were aided by the Blackthorn tree – if they threw a twig of Blackthorn after them, it would take root and form an impenetrable hedge or woods, thwarting the pursuing giant.¹⁹ In England Witches would carve the Norse rune *thorn* on a Blackthorn stave for protection

Often in fairytales, such as "Sleeping Beauty", Blackthorn forms the thick, impenetrable thorn bramble that hides the magic castle from intruders and princes alike! In order to prove worthy, the prince must cut through this thorn forest to rescue the princess.

Blackthorn is said to bloom on Christmas Eve, as is the holy thorn at Glastonbury. It is one of the trees, which were reputed to form the thorny crown of Christ at His crucifixion.

Where Blackthorn grows near its sister plant, Hawthorn, the site is especially magical.²⁰ Blackthorn often topped the Maypole entwined with Hawthorn, and is called “Mother of the Woods”. At New Year, celebrants made Blackthorn crowns, which they burned in the New Year’s fire. The ashes were used to fertilize the fields. Blackthorn was sometimes woven into wreaths with Mistletoe to bring luck in the coming year, and the garlands used to wassail the Apple trees.²¹

¹⁹ Tree Wisdom, page 81

²⁰ The Green Man Oracle, page 76

²¹ Tree Wisdom, page 80



Author standing by Blackthorn bush near the site of Wayland Smithy, August, 2003

Celtic Legend

In *The Word Ogham of Morainn*, for Blackthorn it is said, “careful effort, strongest of red, strong red dye on metal, and hedge of a stream.”²² Steve Blamires teaches that Blackthorn is associated with warriors, war, blood and death. The hedge referred to is the warriors’ spears, and the stream is their rapid advance into battle. According to Steve Blamires, “*Straiph*, that is Blackthorn; the hedge of a stream is *Straiph*.”²³

In the Irish legend, the *Pursuit of Diarmaid and Grainne*, a passage describes Sadhbh eating sloe berries and becoming pregnant as a result. She gave birth to a son who was born with a lump on his head. The lump turned out to be a worm or snake. The snake was eventually killed in sacrifice for another man. In *The Sword of Oscar*, sloe berries are part of a sacrificial theme as well. Blackthorn’s theme in traditional stories often indicate a warrior’s death in service to the High King or tribe.²⁴

In the *Word Ogham of Cuchulain* Blackthorn is “an arrow’s mist” and “smoke drifting up from the fire.” These are both kennings for death.²⁵

²² Celtic Tree Mysteries, page 166

²³ Celtic Tree Mysteries, page 165

²⁴ Celtic Tree Mysteries, page 168

²⁵ Celtic Tree Mysteries, page 168

Literary References

Biblical reference: "There was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan, to buffet me." (*II Corinthians, Ch. 9, v. 19*)²⁶

*"Of all the trees that grow so fair,
Old England to adorn,
Greater are none beneath the Sun
Than Oak and Ash and Thorn."*

(*Puck of Pook's Hill*, by Rudyard Kipling, 1906)²⁷

Ogham Oracle



Straif (ST)²⁹

Drawing a Blackthorn stave or card indicates the actions of fate in your life, something that cannot be avoided but must be faced and dealt with. Blackthorn gives you the strength to accept and persevere in the face of adversity. The Sloe berry sweetens after the first trial of winter, the frost. Accepting fate and adversity as a challenge, and making it work for you, results in an unexpected sweetness in your life.

Blackthorn can also herald the presence of the darker deities in your life, such as the Irish *Morrigan* and *Dagda*. Again, this is a sign of the spiritual strength and support that is available to you if you pick up the gauntlet. It is the one of the trees associated with the *Bean Sidhe* and the *Dubh Sidhe*.

"*Straif* also offers initiation into the mysteries of self-conquest and transcendence."³⁰ Daring to travel with the darker deities of the Celtic pantheon is a spiritual adventure at the deepest level! Blackthorn opens the pathway to Underworld initiation. Meditating under a Blackthorn bush during the Samhain season can put you in touch with powerful Underworld deities, such as the Morrigan. Wear a protective amulet with the Blackthorn ogham, sloe berries, or a blackthorn wand, if you choose to do so.

Blackthorn is the tree, which helps us to face the necessity of our own death. In many magical practices, we are encouraged to face death, in order to abate our morbid fear of it. Initiations are often re-enactments of our own death and rebirth.

²⁶ The Wisdom of Trees, page 122

²⁷ The Wisdom of the Trees, page 125

²⁸ Graphic from OBOD Message Board

²⁹ The Celtic Tree Oracle, page 50

³⁰ Ogham, the Celtic Oracle of the Trees, page 118

On the negative side, Blackthorn can indicate a persistently negative, resentful attitude that draws negative experiences to you. Blackthorn can indicate a persistent and morbid fear of death. How you “frame” your life is how your life plays out. Blackthorn can be seen as a reminder not to frame your life in negative scenes, but re-interpret them in a more positive way, to draw more positive experiences.

Magical Uses

According to John Matthews, the message of Blackthorn is “Magic is Everywhere”³¹.

Jane Gifford assigns *Morrigan* as the deity associated with Blackthorn, as well as the colour red, planets Mars and Saturn, gem Black Opal, and a feminine polarity. The chief attributes are the “Inevitability of Death, protection and revenge, strife, and negativity.”³²

Blackthorn is used for purification, as well as protection, ridding the atmosphere of negative energy. It deals the issues on a Karmic level, which cannot be avoided. Meditating on Blackthorn can purify our minds of negative thoughts and impulses at the deepest level of our psyche. It can aid us in combating fear, depression and anger. The thorns of the Blackthorn can be imagined to lance the built up abscess of negative thoughts, and release the emotional toxins, which can then begin to heal.³³ Using the gentler sister tree, Hawthorn, in conjunction with Blackthorn, can aid the process of healing.



³¹ The Green Man Tree Oracle, page 75

³² The Wisdom of the Trees, page 127

³³ Tree Wisdom, page 84

Traditionally, Blackthorn is used in protection against evil, creating boundaries, purifying, confronting our own dark side. Blackthorn dispels negativity, toxins, old wounds, and impurities. It can be used in exorcisms. It is associated with chthonic and protective deities.

*With Blackthorn staff,
I draw the bound.
All malice and bane,
I thus confound.*

From a blackthorn tree along the Ridgeway near Wayland's Smithy, I cut myself a wand (and left a little blood). I saved the cuttings from the wand as well, which included leaves, twigs and berries, and dried them. I use blackthorn to establish boundaries when working magic, so that nothing evil or unwanted can enter my Circle or Grove.

I also carry a "mojo bag" of protective herbs with me. I've included dried sloe berries for their powers of protection.

Magical Blackthorn tools come in many forms; Irish *shillelagh*, walking sticks, stangs, wands, thorns, ogham staves, berries. Most of these are used for protection, although some will still use the energy of Blackthorn for cursing. Tools made of blackthorn must be treated with the utmost respect.



From Left to right: A Blackthorn walking stick with a knob end (formed from the root); a Blackthorn Thumbstick or Stang, with a forked end; a Blackthorn wand; and the Blackthorn wand I cut from a tree on the Sacred Ridgeway near Wayland Smithy.

Healing with Thorn Trees

Next time you are ill or depressed, imagine lying on your pallet, and in the dark of night, two eldritch sisters enter the room, one dressed in black, the other in white. The dark older sister, *Draighean*³⁴, (Blackthorn), assesses your illness with a calculating experienced eye. She moves her sinewy, dark hands quickly over your body, touching points here and there, causing you acute pain. She mutters strange incantations under her breath in a low, crackling voice. She is frightening, but you must trust her if you are to heal. All the negative images you've ever held rise out of your subconscious like phantom characters in a Samhain festival. The night grows old and dawn approaches. Weary, the elder sister steps back and the gentle *Huath*, (Hawthorn) takes her place. Dressed in white, with long bright hair, she lays a cool gentle hand on your brow, muttering her own incantations in a sweet bell-like voice. The phantoms recede with the light, and the pain eases. As she sweeps her pale hands up and down your body, touching the same spots her dark sister had, the pain vanishes and you feel refreshed. You fall into an easy, restful sleep as the sisters leave your chamber, their work done.

The most powerful times of the year to use Blackthorn for purification and banishing are Imbolc (Feb. 1st) and Samhain (October 31st)

At Imbolc, Blackthorn is one of the first trees to flower, thus, it aids the ushering in of Spring.

In the Celtic Ogham, Blackthorn, called *Straif*, rules the mystical three day period of Samhain, from October 31st to November 2nd, where it marks the "parting of the veils between the physical and the spiritual."³⁵ Blackthorn can be used to create safe boundaries from which to communicate with the dead, and protect us from evil spirits during this auspicious time.

At Samhain, because it's berries ripen in the Winter, it helps us to prepare for the dark season to come.³⁶ At this uncanny time, the *Morrigan* and *Dagda*, are said to mate.

The wintry fruiting Blackthorn tree is associated with Underworld Initiations. The *Cailleach* announces Winter with a bang of her ancient Blackthorn stang.

Blackthorn is also used to celebrate the fertility magic of May Day, along with its sister tree, Hawthorn. Blackthorn wands were used for divination and wishing at this auspicious time of year. Bridal chambers were decorated with Hawthorn and Blackthorn flowers in May, the musky scent of the flowers stimulating desire.³⁷

³⁴ Irish Gaelic for Blackthorn

³⁵ The Wisdom of Trees, Page 122

³⁶ Tree Wisdom, page 82

³⁷ Tree Wisdom, page 85

Blackthorn and Hawthorn, being sister trees, represent the dark half and the light half of the year. Blackthorn is the tree of Samhain, where as Hawthorn is the tree of Beltain.³⁸

Protective Spell from Jacqueline Paterson:³⁹

This spell must be performed with the clear intent of returning ill wishing to the source. In doing so, the spell caster must divorce herself from all ill wishing, or the spell will backfire upon herself. Purchase or carve a candle into a body shape. Carve the name of your tormentor into the candle, naming him or her out loud. Use three Blackthorn thorns, and push one each into the candle image's forehead, heart, and stomach. Light the candle, and when it burns down to each thorn, utter these words each time:

*Evil return to the one who sent thee
For me and mine are now set free
No hurt nor harm can enter here
For my life and way are now made clear.*

Allow the candle to burn down, and out. See yourself as released from the other person's energy. Your intent must *NOT* be to harm your tormentor, but to release every baneful connection between you both. If your tormentor continues to send harm, it will now be his or her responsibility, and rebound on his self or her self. *This spell is about protection and justice, not revenge.*

Deities

I associate this tree with the Irish *Morrigan* and the *Dagda*, the Scottish *Cailleach*, the Welsh *Cerridwen*, the British *Morgan le Fay* and *Gwynn ap Nudd*. All dark, chthonic, Underworld deities.

Jane Gifford associates the Blackthorn with the *Morrigan*⁴⁰. Steve Blamires associates Blackthorn with the Irish God, *Donn*, a father God, who is associated with death. He, being a paternal deity, is a gentle guide who helps us mitigate the fear associated with death.⁴¹

³⁸ The Wisdom of Trees, 124

³⁹ Tree Wisdom, page 86-87

⁴⁰ The Wisdom of Trees, page 127

⁴¹ Celtic Tree Mysteries, page 170



Blackthorn in berry, August, 2003, in Uffington, Great Britain

Druid/Celtic Ritual

Druids often use the magic of wood in their ceremonies. Rituals taking place in sacred groves or *nemetons* are especially potent. The presence of Blackthorn in a Samhain or Yule ritual would be ideal.

Initiations

Blackthorn wands or staffs can be used during initiations. It is especially effective if used in conjunction with a Hawthorn staff to represent death and rebirth; Samhain and Beltaine.

Samhain

During your Samhain ritual, you can use a Blackthorn staff for the celebrants to pass under, on their way to the Underworld.

Samhain or Yule

During your Samhain or Yule ritual, you can ceremonially call the *Caeilleach Bheur*, who is the Old Blue Hag of Winter, a fearsome Scottish deity who, banging Her magic Blackthorn stang upon the ground, calls in the season of Winter.

Song of the Cailleach Bheur

What's all this merriment and cheer?
Is it not winter that you fear?

I am the old veiled one of the wood,
And my appearance shall do you no good.

My realm is cold, dead, and dark.
The ground is barren and the trees are stark.

My fierce white hounds, with eyes of red
Howl through the night, a paeon to the dead.

I strike my blackthorn upon the ground!
Now nothing green or living shall be found.

I am the *Cailleach Bheur*, and now is my reign.
I shall not leave you until next Beltaine.⁴²

⁴² by smb, 1993

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