

Yew Tree

Scientific Name: *Taxus baccata*

Irish Name: lúr

The Common Yew is one of the few native evergreen trees in Ireland and is found throughout the country. It is a conifer and has thin, flat, pointed leaves, which are dark green in colour and have no smell. It grows to about 10-20 metres in height and has a reddish, scaly bark.

A yew tree prefers well-drained soil and a sheltered position. It can live for thousands of years but can be hard to date. While parts of a tree might die, its branches can grow downwards to touch the ground and produce roots. This new growth becomes part of the tree and surrounding the dead wood in the centre. Because of this, there are no rings to count inside the tree.

Only the male trees produce woody cones - the female trees produce red fruit that contain seed, which are poisonous, as is much of the tree. The yew provides shelter and food for birds, which are not harmed by the berries, but livestock are known to have died after eating only a small amount of yew tree. It is important that cuttings of yew are disposed of carefully. Though the toxic substance in the tree is poisonous, it is used to produce medicine for the treatment of cancer.

The wood of the Yew is pliable and is an excellent type of wood for making bows. It is also used for making items such as furniture, musical instruments and for woodturning.



Yew tree by the grotto at the Brandon Mountain walk in Co Kerry.



The fruit of the Common / European Yew.

The Irish Yew & Trees in Churchyards

The Irish Yew is thought to have developed from the Common Yew. All Irish Yew trees come from a cutting taken from a single yew tree found growing in Co. Fermanagh in the 1700s. That tree was cultivated from two trees and produces a smaller, more upright tree than the Common Yew.

Many of the yew trees in churchyards around the world are Irish Yew trees. One reason they may be planted there is that they are seen as a symbol of immortality.



Old St. Mary's Church and Graveyard, Balscaddan, Co. Dublin.

The Oldest Tree in Ireland & its significance in Ireland

At approximately 750 years old, the Silken Thomas Yew tree in the grounds of Maynooth University is believed to be the oldest tree in Ireland. There is one only native yew tree forest in Ireland and that is Reenadonna Wood in Muckross, Co. Kerry (see page 4). The yew tree has an important association in Ireland and many placenames reflect this, having the yew in their name. For example, Terenure or Tír an Iúir, means "Territory of the Yew" and Mayo or Mhaigh Eo means "Plain of the Yew Trees".