

## Betula - Growing Guide

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You can see most of the 35 or more species and many of the best named varieties of birch which exist all in one place at Stone Lane Gardens near Chagford in Devon (just off the A30). The species are planted together in large clumps so that you can admire and appreciate the bark of different species separately. Stone Lane is today a garden charity but it was formerly the home of Kenneth Ashburner who produced a book on the taxonomic revision of birches. In this book *Betula albosinensis*, which was previously a species in its own right, becomes a subspecies of *Betula utilis*. This has caused a bit of recent muddle but the silvery trunks of these superb birches, and their named hybrids, can speak for themselves.

All birches are tolerant of exposed positions (Stone Lane is on the edge of Dartmoor) and fully hardy. They originate from mountains, moorland, and heathland right through the northern hemisphere. Birches produce separate male and female catkins on the same plant in spring. Male catkins are much longer and pendulous than the female ones which are erect at first, and then become pendant when fertilised, and develop into seed capsules. The catkins are yellowish-brown or greenish-yellow. *B. alleghaniensis* has catkins which are at least 4in long. All birches produce wonderful yellow autumn colour when conditions and wind allows.

*Betula pendula*, the common silver birch, has peeling and deeply fissured white bark. It is native to Europe and Russia. Burncoose offers improved weeping forms of *B. pendula* – ‘Youngii’ and ‘Tristis’ which make attractive feature trees in gardens. *Betula pendula* ‘Laciniata’, Swedish birch, also has very pendulous branchlets.

The simplest approach to the birches which we offer, as container grown half standard trees, is perhaps to split them into groups based on bark colour.

## Black barked birches

*Betula nigra*, Black birch, has shaggy red-brown peeling bark when young becoming blackish or grey-white in maturity.

## Orange-brown, reddish-brown or brown barked birches

*Betula alleghaniensis* has amber or golden-brown bark.

*Betula ermanii* has a yellowish-white trunk in juvenility turning brownish-yellow after peeling.

*Betula utilis* subsp. *utilis* 'Nepalese Orange' has a rich orange bark with horizontal banding.

*Betula utilis* subsp. *utilis* 'Wakehurst Place Chocolate' has dark chocolate brown bark.

*Betula* 'Fascination' has deep orange-satin peeling bark turning a pale salmon-white to reveal layers of colours.

*Betula utilis* ssp. *albosinensis* 'China Rose' has superb orange-red peeling bark in maturity.

## Pale pink and white barked birches

*Betula papyifera* has white bark peeling in thin layers.

*Betula utilis* ssp. *jacquemontii* remains, and is deservedly, one of the most popular white barked birches. Known as the Himalayan birch.

*Betula utilis* ssp. *jacquemontii* 'Grayswood Ghost' has the most brilliant white bark and is the standout mature white birch at Stone Lane Gardens.

*Betula utilis* ssp. *jacquemontii* 'Jermyns' is just as good at Rosemoor gardens.

Betula 'Royal Frost' also has an attractive whitish stem but this is a hybrid between two species and not a named variety of a white barked birch.

In arriving at your decision as to which coloured bark you like best or which will sit best in the context of your garden there is an enormous choice as you can see in the bark pictures featured here. Some may be aiming just for a winter effect perhaps combined with coloured stemmed Cornus featured nearby. Others may want a year round effect where the various stages of the bark peeling reveal different colours and textures through the years.

Do not expect a young birch to exhibit its full stem colours initially. These develop with age. Also remember that these photographs were taken right through the year at different stages of bark peeling.

The popular fashion is to plant groups of three white barked birches together as a clump or even to create the effect of a multi stemmed tree. Some of these pictures taken in the Savill Garden at Windsor show this.

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