

Planting Birch.

Introduction

Birch trees (*Betula*) thrive in a wide range of soils and situations, and can be considered amongst the most amenable of trees for general planting. There are a just few key points to consider when choosing the planting position.

In the wild birch are pioneer trees, often living on the edges of the forest. They like plenty of light and do not thrive under the canopy of existing larger trees. However, they do like the company of their own species and grow well (and look good) in groups. There are no strict rules about planting distances, and if space is limited three trees planted in the same hole can create an effective mini copse. If space allows plant groups of 5, 6, 9 or more. Single specimens of large or semi-weeping forms can be effective as a focal point. Multi-stemmed trees are particularly good in this role.

Birch can thrive in a wide range of soil types; really only objecting to extremes of very wet or very dry conditions. Even then some Birch will grow successfully in wet ground as long as it is not permanently waterlogged. Likewise, other varieties can grow in quite dry conditions if they are helped to establish when young.

With the exception of Young's Weeping Birch, no birch can truly be called a small tree (apart from a few naturally stunted forms from colder, harsher climates – and these will also grow slowly in the UK, so are not a practical proposition for most gardens where vigorous early growth is desired. Most grow rapidly as befits their pioneering role in nature. However, the branches, twigs and leaves of birch are unsurpassed for lightness and transparency, so even a large specimen will not be oppressive. But allow space for the tree to reach its true stature, as pruning to control size can spoil the elegance so natural to birch.

The trunk is usually the most eye catching feature of many birch, and it is worth considering the background against which this will be seen. Dark evergreens planted behind the trunks will show up the beauty of white forms dramatically. Groups of shrubs that have warm coloured bark in winter will compliment the peach/honey, cinnamon combinations on some Himalayan and Chinese Birch. By the same token, foreground planting nearby can be kept low or transparent so the full impact of the trunk can be seen to ground level.

Birch are shallow rooting trees and for this reason they are best treated as 'woodland' plants. Planting them in a mixed border creates difficult conditions for the surrounding plants as the birch tree matures. However, woodland plants adapted to growing over the roots of large trees will succeed. Alternatively plant birch in grass areas (maintaining a grass and weed free area at the base of young trees.) In time moss and shade loving plants will replace the grass, and make a seamless connection with surrounding sward.

Spacing and design

As mentioned, birch can tolerate being planted very close together. In the wild they will often form thickets of densely-growing trees. As the trees mature, lower branches are dropped due to lack of light. This creates a mass of fairly thin stems without branches, reaching for the light. Eventually the stronger trees overshadow the weaker ones, the weaker ones gradually die and the copse takes on a more open feel, with more space between stems. The remaining trees start to broaden and thicken out, with a high crown and no low branches.

Equally, they are often found in the wild in a solitary position, clinging to a steep mountain-side, where they generally have a broader shape.

Below we describe several different ways in which you can design your birch planting.

Method 1

To achieve the feel of a natural copse, plant your birch in close groups, with trees spaced 1-3 metres apart. If your budget permits, then plant in large groups for a more natural look and a reasonable density to the copse (better for wildlife). As the trees mature, thin them if necessary to achieve the desired effect. This is best done by completely removing the tree by wrenching out the root with a winch or digger. Felling at the base and leaving the root may encourage the spread of honey fungus (*armillaria mellea*). To work out the number of trees required, the best way is to stick canes in the ground. This gives you a feel for the correct spacing distance for your situation and the look you are trying to achieve.

Method 2

Another popular way of planting birch, is to create a small group with very close planting. 3 or 5 trees (odd numbers always seem best) planted as little as 1 metre apart will form an attractive tight group as they grow. They will require occasional formative pruning to remove any crossing branches to avoid rubbing and improve the shape.

Method 3

An even more severe form of close grouping is to plant 3 trees in one planting hole with their roots virtually touching. This creates the appearance of one multi-stemmed tree. As the group matures their trunks will eventually touch at the base. Again, it will be necessary to occasionally prune out any crossing branches. Whilst it is preferable to plant one multi-stemmed tree, this method is a popular compromise when an appropriate multi-stemmed tree is not available.

Method 4

Alternatively, birch can be planted as single specimens. If given enough room they will keep their lower branches and form a broader, more rounded shape with an attractive skeletal branch structure. This method can provide an excellent focal point in a garden, maybe at the end of a path or where a tight area of planting opens out. Or at the centre of a lawn. Remember, birch are delicate trees producing light shade, so a single tree will not interfere with under-planting or grass.

Mixing species

Generally this is not recommended, unless the species are related. Planting different species close together looks very unnatural. Different growth rates, bark colour and leaf shape can cause both visual and practical problems. If you want to plant several species together, try to choose related species such as *Betula utilis* ssp *jacquemontii*, *Betula utilis* and *Betula albosinensis*. Plant each species in small groups with a distinct gap between species.

Suggested under-planting

The following plants look good under birch, or as a foil or background planting.

Grasses:

In damper ground – *Carex* generally, particularly *C. sylvatica* (Wood Sedge) *C. morrowii*. *C. Pendula* (Pendulous Sedge this can be invasive), *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* Karl Foarster, Damp or dry ground *Luzula sylvatica* *L. nivea* (Snowy Woodrush) Dryer ground *Festuca ovina* (Sheep's Fescue) *F. amethystina*, *Stipa* generally, particularly *S. tenuissima*

Woodland flowers:

Anemone sylvestris *Aquilegia*, *ajuga*, *aruncus*, *dicentra*, *digitalis*, *euphorbia hemerocallis*, *gallium oderatum*, *perennial geraniums* *lamium galeobdolon*, *libertia huechera*, *tierella*, *primula*, *polygonatum*, *paeony*, *thalictrum*, *viola*

Groundcover and Small shrubs:

Acid moist soils *rhododendron*, *camellia*, *cornus Canadensis* *gaulthera procumbens*, *g. miqueliana* *vaccinium oxycoccus* (Cranberry) *v vitis-idaea* (Cowberry)., Acid-dryer, *daboecia erica*, Generally-*euonymus*, *clethra*, *viburnum*, *vinca*

Flowers for boggy areas:

Caltha, *Rodgersia*, *primula*, *astilbe*, *hosta*, *lychnis flos-cuculi*, *lysimachia*, *lytherum*, *lysichiton*, *ranunculus*, *Rheum*

Ferns:

In damper ground - *Athyrium felix femina* (Lady Fern), *Blechnum penna marina*, *B. spicant* (Hard Fern) *Polypodium vulgare* (Polypody Fern) In dryer ground- *Polysichum* generally, particularly *Polysichum setiferum* (Soft shield fern) *P. aculeatum* (Hard shield fern)

Bulbs Corms etc:

Arum, *Anemone nemerosa* (Wood Anemone) *A. nem. Robinsoniana*, *Convallaria majalis* (Lily-of –the-Valley) *Cyclamen*, *Crocsmia* (yellow forms) *Erythronium* (Dog-tooth Violet) *Galanthus* (Snowdrop) *Narcissi*; *hyacinthoides* (Blue-bell)

Some suggested birch trees

For white bark:

B. utilis ssp *jacquemontii*; *B. pendula*; *B. papyrifera*; *B. mandshurica*;

For light coloured bark:

B. utilis; *B. ermanii*; *B. cordifolia*; *B. maximowicziana*; *B. albosinensis*

For dark coloured bark:

B. utilis;

For a weeping habit:

B. pendula

For autumn colour:

B. papyrifera; *B. pendula*; *B. ermanii*; *B. lenta*; *B. alleghaniensis*; *B. medwedewii*; *B. cordifolia*

For damper areas:

B. ermanii; *B. alleghaniensis*;

For more unusual and interesting birch trees, see our website catalogue or on-line shop at www.stonelanegardens.com

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