

Crab Apple *Malus Sylvestris*: the legends

The history, mythology, and spiritual connections with Crab apples, gleaned over the years are many and magical.

History

Man's relation to apple trees dates back to prehistoric times. The Common Apple or Wild Apple (*Malus sylvestris*) is native to Europe and Western Asia. The Celts believed the apple to be associated with rebirth and were said to bury apples in graves as food for the dead, a practice that is shown to date back over 7,000 years to Europe and West Asia where petrified remains of sliced apple have been found in tombs from 5,000BC.

In Latin, the word for an apple is *malus* and the word for evil is *malus*. This could have contributed to the common western belief that the apple was the **forbidden fruit** of the Garden of Eden. Consequently, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the apple tree is associated with knowledge, immortality, temptation and the fall of man. The Greeks and Romans planted apple trees throughout their respective empires. The healing properties of apples were recognized by traditional healers wherever the tree appeared.

According to Pliny, there were 22 varieties of apple trees world-wide. Now, there are estimated to be over 2,000 varieties trees. The Crab Apple however, is Britain's **only indigenous Apple tree** but every invading settler brought in their own local varieties.

The domestic orchard apple we know now, was most likely introduced to this area of the world by the Romans. So, Celtic lore when it speaks of 'apple' would in all likelihood mean crab apple.

Crab apples were known as 'wild apples' in Ireland and were listed as one of the seven '**Nobles of the Wood**', believed to be an important food source since the first humans set foot in the country. Traditionally, crab apples were made into wine, cider and juice, but were also used to flavour mead. They are still used in this way today and grow in abundance on the roadside and in gardens and woodland.

In Scotland, the crab apple is the plant badge of Clan Lamont, whose Highland territories were around Cowal and Argyll.

Shakespeare is said to have slept under crab apple tree in Bidford on Avon after a drinking session, the tree subsequently gained magical powers. Perhaps the experience prompted Shakespeare to include crab apple in 'The Tempest'?

Shakespeare's Caliban in The Tempest said:

*I prithee, let me bring thee where crabs grow,
And I with my long nails will dig thee pig-nuts,
Show thee a jay's nest, and instruct thee how
To snare the nimble marmoset. I'll bring the'
To clust'ring filberts, and sometimes I'll get thee
Young seamews from the rock. Wilt thou go with me?
(2.2.166-171)*

Mythology and Spirituality

The apple has been steeped in rich symbolism throughout history, portrayed in myths, fairy tales, and proverbs as having magical, life-giving powers. In rituals both of the ancient past and present, this fruit is considered to be a gift of the otherworld that supports life as we explore the inevitable deeper, darker realms of being, including death. Apple trees have long been associated with safe havens and sustenance for practitioners of magic, medicine workers, witches, and shamans, linked to truth seeking, divine knowledge and wisdom.

According to Arthurian legend, **Avalon** was also known as Avallach, the Isle of Apples. This was the **land of the fairies** and the dead ruled over by Morgana le Fay where King Arthur was taken to be healed. (Morgana is sometimes referred to as his half sister)

The Druid Merlin was purported to work in a magical Apple Grove in Avalon revealed to him by his master, Gwendolfeu and guarded by birds. He was said to receive the gift of prophecy and sight from the Faerie Queen Morgana le Fay, conferred through the consumption of one of her **magic apples**. Merlin was also said to take shelter under an apple tree during his bouts with madness.

In Irish Celtic folklore, the red-haired Connla, (son of King Connaught and Aife, the famed warrior queen), becomes infatuated with a fairy maiden who gives him an apple that becomes whole again once eaten. Connla dines on this **magical apple** for one month and longs for the fairy maiden to return, which she does and takes him on her crystal boat to the otherworld, where trees bear an endless supply of these mysterious apples that give him **everlasting youth**. The price to pay is that he cannot return to the earthly realm. A similar myth is found in Druid folklore, where Bran is enticed to the otherworld by an enchanting fairy maiden who carries a musical apple branch.

Similarly, in Norse mythology, the apple tree was the tree of immortality and the goddess Idunn, keeper of apples, fed the apples to all the gods and goddesses, keeping them **young forever**.

To the Norse, apples represented long life, wisdom and love. Apple wands were also used in Norse love rituals often adorned with silver and golden bells. Apples were eaten and given to the gods to help keep old age at bay.

In Greek mythology the Earth Goddess, Gaia, gave Hera, the Queen of Heaven, an apple tree when she married the Chief God, Zeus. That tree was kept in the Garden of the Hesperides, guarded by the dragon, Ladon. One of Hercules' tasks was to fetch an apple from that tree. Paris signalled his judgment of the fairest of the Goddesses by giving Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love, an apple.

Celtic stories also identify the apple with love and fertility and the star found when an apple is cut across its middle is known as Aphrodite's Star, Aphrodite being the Goddess of love. The core of an apple, cut down through the middle, is said to symbolise the female reproductive system and give the tree the old country name 'tree of love'.

In Irish lore, the God Óengus offered three miraculous apple trees from the magical woods, Bruig na Bóinde (New Grange), as a wedding gift for the one of the Milesians. One was in full bloom, one shedding its blossoms, and one in fruit.

In Ireland the quest for wisdom was realized by pursuing the white doe under a wild Apple tree.

The deliberate felling of an Apple Tree was punishable by death in ancient Irish law and because it is a universal symbol of plenty, felling an apple tree is said to bring bad luck. To burn an apple tree is sacrilege indeed.

In the Welsh *Câd Goddeu* (The Battle of the Trees), the Apple is described as the noblest tree of them all, the tree that symbolized poetic immortality.

In Herefordshire, April 1768, twelve women bearing Apple tree branches walked in the funeral cortege of Velters Cornwall of Moccas 1768. The apples probably symbolized the British after-life. Apples are sometimes buried in churchyards in an effort to feed the dead. Apples also symbolize rebirth.

The apple has also been depicted in ancient stories and fairy tales as being quite the opposite of life-giving, instead seen as ominous, dangerous, and even poisonous. The Latin word for apple is *malus*, which also means evil, thus the probable connection to the belief that the apple is a forbidden fruit or even a poisonous one. Think of the Garden of Eden, or the story of Snow White by the Brothers Grimm, or Snowdrop, a lesser-known version of Snow White from Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. The poisonous apple in this story is *"beautiful to look upon, pale with rosy cheeks, and everyone who saw it longed for it, but whoever ate of it was certain to die."*

Magic and traditions

The Crab Apple is a member of the Rose family, which includes other magical British ogham trees, such as Rowan, Hawthorn and Blackthorn, as well as other fruit trees such as the Cherry, Plum and Pear trees.

When it comes to witchcraft and magic, the apple historically has strong associations with love, healing, longevity, immortality, divination, life after death, knowledge and wisdom, and magic involving the elements. Witches, as well as the pagan Celts and Druids, knew the secret that the apple holds, that within it, the seeds form a perfect pentagram resembling earth, air, fire, and water bound by spirit. In the Word Ogham of Cuchulain, the apple is described as an emblem of protection. The pentacle in its centre being a potent talisman of protection. Apple trees are one of the magical trees part of the Celtic Ogham tree alphabet, its Ogham name being Quert.

The apple has a strong connection to the pagan sabbat Samhain (October 31 to November 1) and is considered the food of the dead. Samhain is also called the “Feast of Apples”. Many Halloween legends and magical practices are associated with the apple. Some say that if you bury an apple in the ground beneath the light of a Halloween moon, it will provide nourishment and healing for the souls of the dead who wander the earth on this mystical night. Apple growers would bury thirteen leaves from an apple tree in their orchard on Halloween, in complete silence and in secret, to ensure a hardy future crop.

Unicorns are said to live beneath apple trees and can be spotted gallivanting in orchards on silvery, foggy mornings. On the dark side, in Medieval fairy tales such as Snow White, the Queen (a powerful sorceress) used a magic apple to curse the young Princess into terminal sleep. The Medieval church believed enchanted apples could be given to a victim to cause demonic possession.

The sacred Druid plant, an t-uil-oc (Mistletoe), is often found on Apple trees, making it an especially holy tree to the Druids, along with the Oak. In the Irish Druid tradition, the Silver Bough is cut from a magical Apple tree, where silver apple shaped bells played a mystical tune, which could lull people into a trance state. Druids could make contact with the ‘otherworld’ during a trance enhanced by this silver apple bough.

The Apple Tree is closely linked to Druids in their aspect as magicians and shamans. The tree is often used when the Druid undergoes a magical transformation or journeys in the Otherworld. In ‘The Voyage of Bran’, an Otherworldly woman appears with an apple branch laden with bells, entrancing Bran with wondrous tales of the Otherworld. So enraptured is he by this damsel with the magical apple branch, that he sets sail immediately for the enchanted shores, having epic adventures on his journey.

In Druid lore, the essence of three sacred apples growing on the **Tree of Knowledge** came from three drops that fell from Cerridwen's cauldron, which correspond with the Druid's most holy symbol, the Three Rays of Light.

Thomas the Rhymer, of Ercledoune, in 13th Century Scotland, was warned not to eat the Otherworldly Apple offered by the Faerie Queen, or he would be unable to return to mortal life.

Bards (poets) and Ovates (shamans) carried apple branches (with bronze, silver, or gold bells), called the Craobh Ciuil (Branch of Reason), as symbols of their office.

Wassail

In Great Britain it is customary to wassail the oldest apple tree in the orchard on Twelfth Night (either January 6th or old Twelfth Night on January 17th) to ward off evil spirits and beseech the trees to produce a fine harvest of apples the following spring. The oldest tree is named Apple Tree Man, and is the guardian of all the trees in the orchard. Wassail probably comes from the Anglo Saxon words, wes hal, meaning good health. There are many traditions connected with this rite, including shooting through the branches to ward off evil spirits, and pouring apple cider through the roots. Celebrants drink warm cider and sing traditional Wassail songs.

La Mas Ushal was brewed at the end of October in preparation for the Druid's 'Day of the Apple' on November 1st. This recipe has come down to us as the Wassail Bowl, made from baked or roasted crab apples, brown ale or cider, honey, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, brown sugar, and ginger. Toast soaked in the cider is placed in the branches for the Robins, who embody the spirit of the apple trees.

The last apple is often left on the tree at harvest time, for the Apple Tree Man, to ensure a good harvest the next year.

To find love

According to folklore if lovers throw crab apple pips into the fire and they explode, then love is true.

Peeling an apple in front of the mirror and throwing it over the left shoulder, a young maiden can recognize the initial of her future husband.

For a love ritual, charge a small piece of rose quartz to your purpose, then place it in a red bag. With pink ribbon, tie the bag on a branch of an apple tree where it will not be disturbed. When your wish is fulfilled, bury the amulet near the tree, or throw it in the nearest body of water.

In ancient Silesia (now part of Poland), the apple tree was a 'dream tree'. Sleeping under the tree could induce dreams, or merely placing an apple under her pillow on New Year's Eve, would induce a midnight dream in a young woman, of her future husband.

Sayings: I'd rather have a young man with an apple in his hand than an old man with houses and land

Healing

Not only are apples revered for their magical properties, but also as healing food and natural medicine, so the ancient idea that they promoted longevity and immortality makes sense. Apples are rich in vitamins and minerals. They improve circulation, support the functions of the nervous system and brain, are high in fibre, beneficial to the liver, good for easing heartburn and an upset stomach, and make an ideal healthy snack that releases its sugars slowly, keeping blood sugar stable.

Our ancestors relied on the apple to stay healthy. Many folk legends associate the apple with beauty, long life, and restored youth.

The Bach Flower Remedy crab apple claims to cure self-dislike, despondency, obsessions, fussiness, and anxiety.

Apples contain sugars, amino acids, magnesium, iron, potassium, carbohydrates, vitamins C, B and B2, phosphates, tartaric acids, pectin, and mineral salts. They are recommended by healers for intestinal infections, constipation, mental and physical fatigue, hypertension, rheumatism, gout, anaemia, bronchitis, urine retention, hepatic disorders, gastric and kidney malfunctions, hoarseness, coughing, and excess cholesterol in the blood.

Apples can be eaten raw, juiced, or even pulped and made into a poultice for inflammations and sprains. Apple cider vinegar has tremendous restorative properties. In folk healing, rubbing two halves of a sliced apple on a wart, then burying it, will eliminate the wart. Mashed rotten apples can be used as a poultice to treat sore eyes.

According to Scottish herbalist, Mary Beith, a decoction was made of apples and rowan berries, sweetened with brown sugar to cure whooping cough in the Highlands.

Juliette de Bairacli Levy international herbalist says crab apples were used to make the magic potent drink 'verjuice'. A cure for all stomach and bowel disorders and diarrhoea.

A Welsh remedy from the Physicians of Myddfai:

For all sorts of agues, write on three apples on three separate days. In the first apple, 'O nagla pater.' On the second apple, 'O nagla filius.' On the third apple, 'O nagla spiritus sanctus.' On the third day he will recover

So, an apple a day could indeed keep the doctor away!.

Old saying: To eat an apple before going to bed, makes the doctor beg for his bread.