**Mythology and Folklore of the Rowan**

The [rowan's](http://www.treesforlife.org.uk/tfl.rowan.html) mythic roots go back to classical times. Greek mythology tells of how Hebe the goddess of youth, dispensed rejuvenating ambrosia to the gods from her magical chalice. When, through carelessness, she lost this cup to demons, the gods sent an eagle to recover the cup. The feathers and drops of blood which the eagle shed in the ensuing fight with the demons fell to earth, where each of them turned into a rowan tree. Hence the rowan derived the shape of its leaves from the eagle's feathers and the appearance of its berries from the droplets of blood.

The rowan is also prominent in Norse mythology as the tree from which the first woman was made, (the first man being made from the ash tree). It was said to have saved the life of the god Thor by bending over a fast flowing river in the Underworld in which Thor was being swept away, and helping him back to the shore. Rowan was furthermore the prescribed wood on which runes were inscribed to make rune staves.

In the British Isles the rowan has a long and still popular history in folklore as a tree which protects against witchcraft and enchantment. The physical characteristics of the tree may have contributed to its protective reputation, including the tiny five pointed star or pentagram on each berry opposite its stalk (the pentagram being an ancient protective symbol). The colour red was deemed to be the best protection against enchantment, and so the rowan's vibrant display of berries in autumn may have further contributed to its protective abilities, as suggested in the old rhyme: "Rowan tree and red thread / make the witches tine (meaning 'to lose') their speed". The rowan was also denoted as a tree of the Goddess or a Faerie tree by virtue (like the [**hawthorn**](http://www.treesforlife.org.uk/forest/mythfolk/hawthorn.html) and elder) of its white flowers.

There are several recurring themes of protection offered by the rowan. The tree itself was said to afford protection to the dwelling by which it grew, pieces of the tree were carried by people for personal protection from witchcraft, and sprigs or pieces of rowan were used to protect especially cows and their dairy produce from enchantment. Thus we find documented instances as late as the latter half of the twentieth century of people being warned against removing or damaging the rowan tree growing in their newly acquired garden in the Scottish Highlands and Ireland. On the Isle of Man crosses made from rowan twigs without the use of a knife were worn by people and fastened to cattle, or hung inside over the lintel on May Eve each year. From Scotland to Cornwall similar equal-armed crosses made from rowan twigs and bound with red thread were sewn into the lining of coats or carried in pockets. Other permutations of the use of rowan's protective abilities are many and widespread. In Scandinavia, rowan trees found growing not in the ground but out of some inaccessible cleft in a rock, or out of crevasses in other trees' trunks or boughs, possessed an even more powerful magic, and such trees were known as 'flying rowan'.

Rowan has had a wide range of popular folk names, the most well-know being mountain ash. Its old Gaelic name from the ancient Ogham script was Luis from which the place name Ardlui on Loch Lomond may have been derived. The more common Scots Gaelic name is caorunn (pronounced choroon, the ch as in loch), which crops up in numerous Highland place names such as Beinn Chaorunn in Inverness-shire and Loch a'chaorun in Easter Ross. Rowan was also the clan badge of the Malcolms and McLachlans. There were strong taboos in the Highlands against the use of any parts of the tree save the berries, except for ritual purposes. For example a Gaelic threshing tool made of rowan and called a buaitean was used on grain meant for rituals and celebrations. The strength of these taboos did not apply in other parts of Britain it seems, though there were sometimes rituals and timings to be observed in harvesting the rowan's gifts (for example the rule against using knives to cut the wood, mentioned above).

The rowan's wood is strong and resillient, making excellent walking sticks, and is suitable for carving. It was often used for tool handles, and spindles and spinning wheels were traditionally made of rowan wood. Druids used the [**bark**](http://www.treesforlife.org.uk/forest/ecological/tree_bark.html) and berries to dye the garments worn during lunar ceremonies black, and the bark was also used in the tanning process. Rowan twigs were used for divining, particularly for metals.

The berries can be made into or added to a variety of alcoholic drinks, and different Celtic peoples each seem to have had their favourites. As well as the popular wine still made in the Highlands, the Scots made a strong spirit from the berries, the Welsh brewed an ale, the Irish used them to flavour Mead, and even a cider can be made from them. Today rowan berry jelly is still made in Scotland and is traditionally eaten with game.

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