

## Lindens in the landscape

My recent summer holidays took me to Canterbury, and one sunny Sunday morning I found myself on the road to Banks Peninsula, destined for a day at the beach with friends. As we drove through Cooptown, a small hamlet just past the village of Little River, we all remarked on the beautiful avenue of mature linden (or lime) trees, resplendent in their full summer foliage, a brilliant green. On returning home, a little research told me that these notable trees were planted by the Wairewa County Council in 1940 to commemorate the centenary of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Apparently, native species were considered, but in *The Press* of 16 August 1940 it was reported that 80 linden trees had been secured, and as part of the upgrade of the road through Cooptown the roadside had been surveyed, boundaries defined and planting holes dug. Another more recent account numbers the trees at 120 in total, so I am not sure if subsequent plantings were made in later years. This living memorial has stood the test of time, and remains a significant landmark for locals and tourists alike on the well-travelled section of State Highway 75 from Christchurch to Akaroa. The in-car discussion that these trees sparked stirred thoughts of not only the value of lindens as statuesque landscape trees, but also of their value as a functional and edible species. My study of lime-y literature also turned some interesting links to folklore; let me enlighten you.

The genus *Tilia* contains approximately 30 species of trees and bushes, native to temperate zones in the Northern Hemisphere. The common name of 'lime' is applied in the United Kingdom and Ireland, though as classified in Malvaceae or mallow family, they are not even remotely close relatives of the citrus fruit-bearing lime trees of the Rutaceae. The term 'linden' is applied to the European species, and 'basswood' to the North American species. I have used the terms linden and lime interchangeably in this article. It is interesting to note the greatest species diversity is found amongst *Tilia* found in Asia. The genus is dominated by large deciduous trees, often reaching 20 to 40 metres in height, and it is these most familiar examples that I will focus on.

Although commonly found in mixed woodland and copses across Europe, in New Zealand, *Tilia* species are most likely to be found lining streets (as in Cooptown), or in parks and botanic gardens. In '*The Wild Foods of Great Britain*' author T. Cameron describes the lime to be "too well known to need description" but I shall do so here. The most commonly encountered species are *Tilia cordata*, the small-leaved lime; *T. platyphyllos*, the large-leaved lime; and due to the propensity of this genus to hybridise, a hybrid of these two former species, *Tilia x europaea*, the common lime or linden, which now dominates in the UK, being more commonly found than either of its parent species.

Young trees have smooth grey bark, which becomes gnarled and burred with age. Mature trees develop impressive skirts of suckers at the base of the trunk and also further up the tree, and the presence of these is often used as a key identifying characteristic, especially when the trees are viewed from a distance. The leaves are round to heart-shaped, and the fragrant cream-yellow flowers, borne in December and January, are hermaphroditic, with both male and female parts present on the same flower. Lindens are insect pollinated – in his 1972 cult classic '*Food for Free*', Richard Mabey describes the trees as being able to be tracked down "by sound" when in flower, so numerous are the bees frequenting the flowers. The tender summer foliage is also immensely popular with aphids and their parasitoids – a little more on that later.

So what of the folklore associated with the genus *Tilia*? I've recently been lent a copy of Jonathan Drori's charming '*Around the World in 80 Trees*' and here I learned that linden trees were associated with Freya, the Germanic goddess of love, spring and fertility – so it is unsurprising that there are many references in literature to trysts, first kisses and historic battles taking place under or in the vicinity of lindens. Many German villages will have a linden tree at their heart, providing a past and present meeting place for dances, celebrations, and also judicial proceedings – giving rise to the phrase '*sub tilia*', applied literally to verdicts passed 'under the linden'. In modern day Berlin, you'll find a

well-known boulevard lined with lime trees, appropriately named *Unter den Linden*. Croatia's currency, the *kuna*, consists of 100 *lipa* (*Tilia*). Slavic Orthodox Christian tradition dictates that lime wood be used for the panels that religious icons are painted on, due to its resistance to warping and ability to be sanded to a very fine finish. Lindens are also mentioned in Baltic and Greek mythology, as well as myriad references in literature both ancient and modern so frequent that Wikipedia devotes a whole page to the lime tree in culture.

In a practical sense, the linden has much to offer in the way of resources. Fibre obtained from *Tilia* bark has been, and is still used to make rope and other cordage as well as mats and clothing. Examples of the latter exist from Bronze Age excavations as well as from the Ainu people of Japan, who weave a traditional *attus* (robe) from *T. japonica* bark-cloth. The light-grained, easily-worked wood is a favourite with those who carve and craft furniture, and is also popular with the makers of musical instruments, due to its superior acoustic qualities.

Bees are strongly attracted to the highly-scented flowers, producing a pale but strongly-flavoured honey from them, which is deemed to be one of the best (according to Jonathan Drori, think “fresh and woody, with a hint of mint and camphor”). The tender, bright green, almost translucent new leaves are prized in foraging circles as a succulent (and far superior) substitute for traditional salad greens. Richard Mabey suggests collecting them before they roughen, and using them straight from the tree (or well washed, according to personal preference) as a sandwich filling between slices of bread and butter with a sprinkle of lemon juice. Aphids also find the leaves irresistible, and leave them coated in a slick, sticky layer of honeydew. *Tilia* enthusiasts who can get over the fact they are consuming insect excreta relish this additional layer of sweetness, deeming it extraordinarily complementary to the subtle flavour of the leaves themselves. Collected in midsummer, the honey-scented lime flowers can be collected and gently dried to make a very popular and well-known fragrant herbal tea (*tilleul* in French; *Lindenblüten* in German), purported to have multiple therapeutic properties, and at the very least a soothing and calming brew. See the sidebar for the method of preparation. In Proust’s novel ‘*In Search of Lost Time*’ (or *The Remembrance of Things Lost - À la recherche du printemps perdu*), the narrator famously dips a madeleine sponge cake into a cup of lime-flower tea, which triggers a chain of involuntary memories, which are the main theme of the novel.

Have a suitable amount of space and tempted to plant a linden or two of your own? These stately deciduous trees are hardy, and will grow vigorously in well-drained but moist soil, preferring a site in full sun or partial shade. They are available to order from Southern Woods in Christchurch, [www.southernwoods.co.nz/shop](http://www.southernwoods.co.nz/shop).

### **A recipe for tilleul**

After R. Mabey and T. Cameron

Gather the flowers whilst they are in full bloom, in December or early January, and lay them out on trays or sheets of paper in a warm, well-ventilated room to dry. After two or three weeks they should be brittle and ready to use.

To make the tea, crush a good handful of the dried blossoms, stalks and all, into a teapot, cover with boiling water, and leave to draw. The pale, fragrant tea that results is best served in teacups without milk; sugar and a small slice of lemon are suitable accoutrements.

### **References**

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