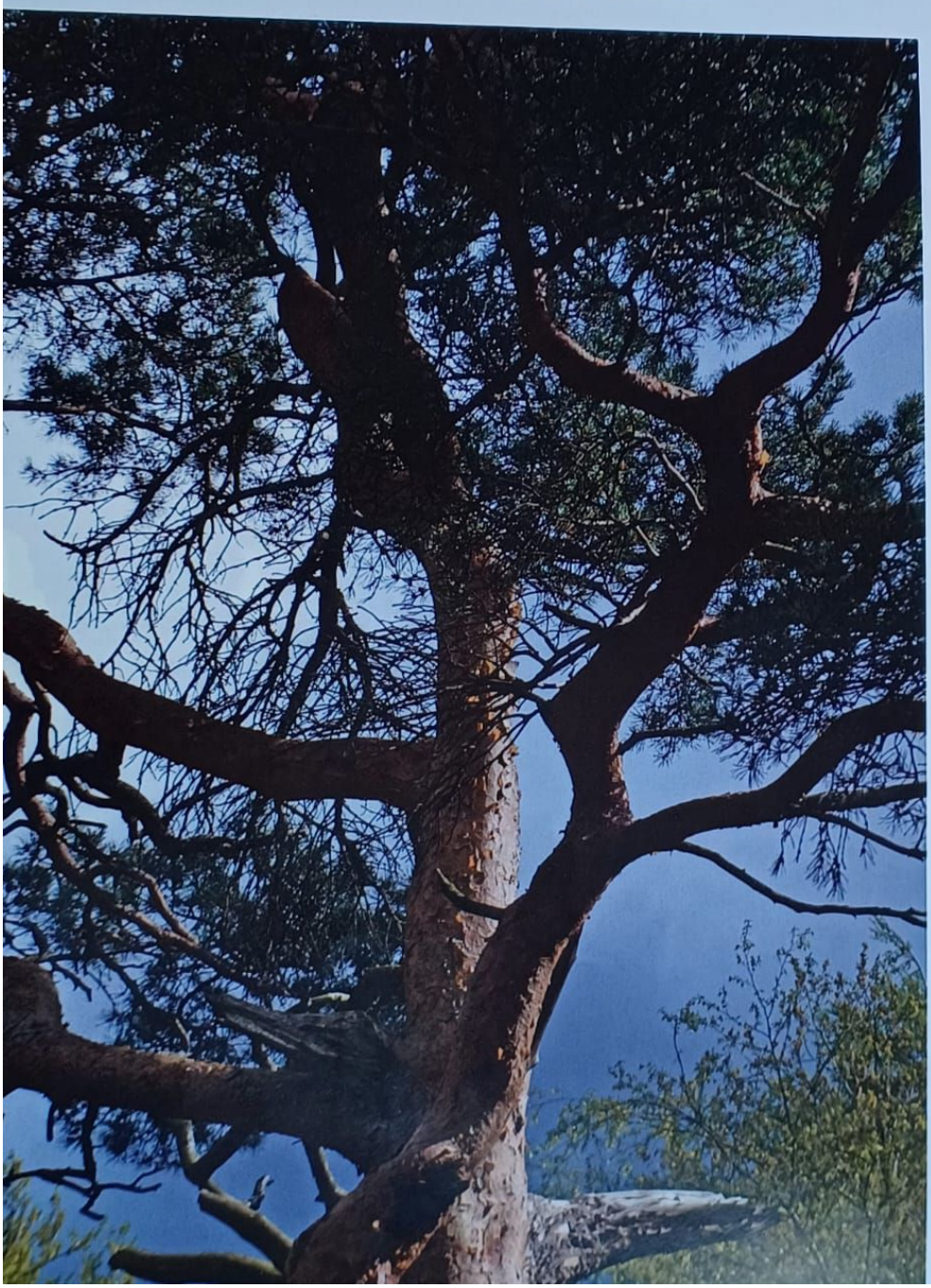
Medicinal uses of **Scots pine**

Soraya Bishop, Community Herbalist at Grass Roots Remedies Co-op

Grass Roots Remedies is a workers' co-operative based in Edinburgh and Glasgow. At the very heart of our work is the fundamental belief that herbal medicine is, and always has been, the medicine of the people, and so should be accessible to everyone. We are dedicated to celebrating our common and abundant wild weeds, trees, fungi and seaweeds, and making herbal medicine accessible to those that need it most.



Since 2015 we have run the Wester Hailes Community Herbal Clinic which aims to make herbalism available to people who wouldn't otherwise have access to it. As a result of social and economic deprivation, residents of Wester Hailes are disproportionately affected by health and social inequality, and the life expectancy in some areas of the scheme is as low as 61. Our aims are to rekindle the place of herbal medicine as a People's Medicine through community-centred health initiatives and to educate and empower people to feel more control over their own health. We do this through running the clinic and offering free community education programmes and herb-growing projects in the neighbourhood. We also run courses in herbal medicine and foraging open to everyone across Edinburgh and Glasgow, with online courses now an option for folks across the British Isles.

Like many, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we had to pause many of our workshops for a while, but socially distanced herb walks are one of the first things we have been able to restart again, and in mid-May we ventured out on our first tree walk of the year as part of one of our courses. Winding our way through woodland in north Edinburgh, we discussed the medicinal properties of the hawthorn, birch, elder, horse chestnut and, of course, the majestic Scots pine.

Many of our trees are steeped in culture and tradition and have a wide variety of uses, be it as food, medicine, fuel or timber, and the Scots pine is no exception. In the past, pines were revered as symbols of life and immortality, and this tree was 'king of the forest, wildman of the woods, tree of heroes, chieftains and warriors: the spirit of the ancient Caledonian pinewood'[1] and it was planted on warriors' graves.

The ancestors of today's pines colonised the Earth during the Jurassic Age, some 300 million years ago, and grew widely in Scotland until the Highland Clearances and mass deforestation reduced them to the remnants we know today as the ancient Caledonian pine forests – enjoyed by many.

Arguably Scotland's most iconic tree species, the contrast of soft grey-green foliage and orange-pink flakey bark make Scots pine one of the prettiest pine trees as well. If you time it right and are as lucky as we were on

---

1. Darwin, Tess (1996) The Scot's Herbal: The Plant Lore of Scotland. Birlinn Ltd, Edinburgh.

our tree walk, buzzing from being outdoors together as the restrictions started to ease, you might just see them in flower too, and as the pollen is gently drawn from the flowers on the breeze, a muted, lemon-yellow dust can be seen trailing across the forest. Seeing this in the dappled sunlight is a truly magical experience, connecting you with the ancients who used the buds, needles, resin, pollen, kernels and bark as food and medicine.

Some of the uses of 'the juicy tree' (a Scots Gaelic translation) are not in current popular use. The inner bark, for example, can be eaten but was only gathered and used in making bread during times of famine. Healing ointments for boils and sores were traditionally made in Scotland out of beeswax, pig fat and pine resin, and the buds were used for scurvy.

Other parts are delicious foods and medicines and are more commonly used in the present day. The buds and needles of the Scots pine are edible and are high in vitamin C and aromatic compounds, making them a good flavouring for drinks. The pollen is also exceptionally nutritious – a complete protein and packed full of minerals and vitamins.

Pine needles are a traditional remedy for upper respiratory conditions. As a warming and drying stimulating expectorant, they are good for wet or mucous-producing coughs but less so for dry irritating ones, and are indicated in conditions such as catarrh, sinusitis, bronchitis, rhinitis, laryngeal infections and asthma. Steam inhalations of the needles or essential oil can be used to decongest and disinfect the upper respiratory passages.

Used externally, the buds and needles are anti-microbial, warming and anti-inflammatory. They can be used in ointments or oils for aching muscles, rheumatism and neuralgia, and pine resin, harvested with respect fresh from the tree, has many uses in wilderness first aid and bushcraft. After fresh wounds are washed, the resin can be applied to cuts where it acts as a protective glue, stopping bleeding and preventing infection.

In May and June, the young, tender pine needles are growing and can be enjoyed as an aromatic tea, relaxing to the central nervous system, or why not try one of my favourites – an aromatic pine-infused vinegar? Simply collect a small handful of young Scots pine needles, chop them up and fill a small, thoroughly cleaned jam jar. Pour over apple cider vinegar and let it infuse for 2–4 weeks, agitating frequently. Then, strain off your pine needles, bottle up your beautifully aromatic pine-infused vinegar and store it in a cool dark place. Enjoy your finished woodland remedy, which is high in vitamin C, by adding it to salad dressings, sprinkling over cooked greens or simply adding a teaspoon into hot or cold water for a refreshing drink.

When foraging, a sustainable harvesting practice should always be adhered to. For more information on respecting our wild flora, on how to make herbal-infused vinegars and on the medicinal properties of the Scots pine tree, visit the resources section of our website.

You can watch a short video of our work in Wester Hailes on our website too, and if you would like to support us, you can buy a £35 'pay it forward' clinic appointment for a local resident who cannot afford one. Every donation is greatly appreciated.

If you are interested in our courses in foraging and herbal medicine or signing up to our mailing list, visit our website or get in touch. We would love to hear from you.

www.grassrootsremedies.co.uk
hello@grassrootsremedies.co.uk
Facebook: Grass Roots Remedies Co-op
Instagram: grassrootsremedies

Scots pine in flower.