

Hello. I'm Daniel Brint. Welcome to the Upper Street TODAY language talk, a weekly podcast about English language, expressions, idioms and any other topics of interest inspired by TODAY's subject.

Today is national tree week in the UK.

It's hard to think of another plant that has such significance for human beings. Trees feature in fairy tales, myths and legends. In the Robin Hood stories trees and forest are places of freedom and resistance, in myths they often have magical powers, in the Lord of the Rings they walk and talk and impart wisdom. Trees have inspired artists and poets and landscape designers, they can be dark and scary - as in a gothic tales - or something to soothe our urban anxieties and connect us with nature. They give us food, they shelter us from the rain (trees were the inspiration for the umbrella) and they provide safety from wild animals. Not that we averse to chopping them down and using them to make boats and furniture, cricket bats, bowls, spoons and toothpicks. It's however a measure of how much people care about trees that the recent vandalism - well, destruction of an ancient tree in the north of England, chopped down in the night, caused real outrage and shock across the country.

Despite their ubiquity, I suspect most of us would be hard-pressed to name more than a few of them. After pine, willow, olive and oak we tend to run out of terms. How different from people even a couple of generations ago, who could probably not only name many more trees but also tell you what the wood could, and couldn't be used for.

The familiarity of trees - both their function and shape - is apparent in the expressions we use. We can talk about branching out - expanding into new areas, and from that, the term 'branch' as in the local, de-centralized version of a bank or office. You put down roots when you decide to settle down and become part of a community. Trees can convey wisdom through proverbs and metaphors - when we are unable to focus on the key issues, we can't see the wood for the trees. A child whose behaviour strongly resembles their parent's - and usually not in a good way - is proof that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Extravagance is condemned by being reminded that money doesn't grow on trees. And not every tree is a good thing - if you are up a gum tree, you find yourself in a difficult situation.

As I mentioned earlier, trees have sources of inspiration in culture and literature, and modern science, far from de-mystifying them, has made us even more aware of how special they are. We now know that trees form communities and help each other. When a wood or forest tree is diseased, nearby trees redirect their nutrients through root systems to help it. It is also claimed that there is no reason why a tree should die. Given the right conditions and care. So it seems trees are about the closest we get to immortality in the natural world. I've often noticed how writers and poets use trees to express their ideas. The American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote a sonnet in which she looks back on her life and loves and sees herself as a winter tree

Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,

I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.

Joyce Kilmer, a deeply religious American poet, wrote one of the most famous poems of his time, and it goes like this:

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

The humorist Ogden Nash, compared the three to billboards – the kinds of outdoor advertising posters placed alongside the roads. Nash notices that nature is hidden by these enormous signs, and reflects that:

I think that I shall never see
A billboard lovely as a tree.
Perhaps, unless the billboards fall,
I'll never see a tree at all.

This is the last of this season of Upper Street podcasts. I'll be back in January and hope you will join me then.