

Lime Trees

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There are around 300 lime trees in Battersea Park, but you won't find any limes on them for your drinks. The fruit which we call a lime is produced by a completely different tree whose name is believed to be derived from an Arabic or Persian word, via Spanish or Portuguese, whereas the name of the lime trees in the Park is derived from the Middle English word 'lind'—the wood of the tree used to be called 'linden' in English. The botanical name for the genus is *Tilia*, the name used by the ancient Romans.

Limes are the fourth commonest kind of tree in the Park after plane, holly and maple/sycamore. Over half are common limes (*Tilia x europaea*), a naturally occurring hybrid between small-leaved lime (*Tilia cordata*) and large-leaved lime (*Tilia platyphyllos*) (fig.1). Although common limes are rare in the UK in the wild, from the early 17th century to the mid-20th century they were the most planted kind of lime, and they are frequently found in London parks and squares.

In and around the Promontory Garden you can see some large-leaved limes. Their leaves can be larger than those of the common lime, up to 15 x 15 cm as opposed to typically 10 x 10 cm, and the sides of the leaves may droop. The leaves of a large-leaved lime have small hairs all over the underside of the leaf, whereas the leaves of common lime only have whitish tufts under the vein joints (figs.2a & 2b). Common limes often have prolific suckers at the base of the trunk (fig.3).

The small-leaved lime has leaves of around 8 x 8 cm with brownish hair tufts on the underside (fig.4). It used to be one of the commonest trees in England, but it is now absent in the wild from many counties. Unlike the hanging flower clusters on large-leaved and common limes, the flowers on small-leaved limes spread out at all angles and are often smaller (figs.5a & 5b). There is a row of small-leaved limes in front of Putt in the Park.

One of the cultivars of common lime, *Pallida*, provides most of the trees in the avenues either side of the fountain ponds. The other trees in these avenues are a different hybrid, Crimean limes (*Tilia x euchlora*). The glossy leaves of the Crimean lime are less attractive to aphids and have brownish tufts on the underside. Lime trees line Unter den Linden, the boulevard in Berlin which runs from the City Palace to the Brandenburg Gate—the first lime trees were planted there in 1647.

Silver limes (*Tilia tomentosa*) have leaves with dense white hairs below which give the undersides a silvery appearance (fig. 6). A number can be seen in the area between Albert Bridge Road and West Carriage Drive. These include examples of the *Petiolaris* cultivar, which has weeping side-branches. In 2019 a *Brabant* cultivar of silver lime was donated by Wandsworth Council and planted in recognition of the "dedication and commitment shown by the Friends" and you can find it in the grass to the east of the Pear Tree Cafe. This cultivar is less attractive to aphids, and drought tolerant. It should grow to 20m.

When the inconspicuous yellow flowers come out in June, it is hard not to notice their sweet aroma, which has been described as a blend of honey and lemon peel and can be detected from some distance away. Bees love these flowers, and from them can be made a tea which is used in herbalism. After the blossom has fallen, small pea-like fruit hangs from a ribbon-like bract which helps the seeds to disperse further from the tree. The fruits of the common lime are shown in fig.5c.

If you have parked under a lime tree you may find that a sticky film has been deposited on the car. Aphids feed on the tree's sap, and secrete a sugary waste, known as 'honeydew', which falls and accumulates on surfaces below. Ants, which farm the aphids, feed on the honeydew.

You may see odd-looking red or yellow

tubular growths on the upper surface of lime tree leaves. These are caused by a mite. As it sucks sap from the leaves, it releases chemicals that produce these growths, within which it is protected (fig.7).

The leaves of a lime tree are heart-shaped and often asymmetrical. The lime is one of the first trees to lose its leaves in autumn.

The height of a lime can exceed 40 metres and they can live for 500 years. The lime trees in St James's Park are said to have been planted around 1660.

The flowers, leaves, and wood, together with charcoal made from the wood, can all be used for medicinal purposes.¹

The wood of a lime tree is very suitable for fine carving:

"Smooth Linden best obeys

The carver's chisel; best his curious work

Displays in nicest touches."²

Grinling Gibbons, the 17th century sculptor, is famous for his intricate lime wood carvings of flowers, fruits, leaves and small animals which can be seen in places such as St. Paul's Cathedral and Hampton Court.

Contact batterseaparktrewatchers@btinternet.com if you would like to discuss trees or other flora of Battersea Park with the authors.

¹en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tilia

²From Robert Dodsley's *three canto blank verse georgic on Agriculture* (1753).

All the photographs for this article have been taken by the authors.

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