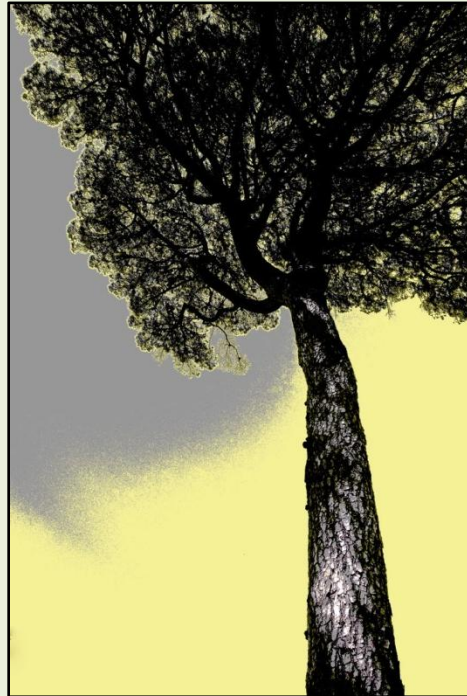


What Makes a Tree a Sacred Tree?



A tree becomes sacred through recognition of the power that it expresses. This power may be manifested in the form of food, shelter, heat, transportation, and/or medicine that the tree provides. These uses vary according to both geography and species of tree, and depend on the particular needs (and ingenuity) of the human culture involved. Sacred trees have also provided beauty, hope, comfort, and inspiration to us on emotional, mental, and spiritual levels. They are symbols of life, abundance, creativity, generosity, permanence, energy, and strength.

Sacred trees have been found to play a part in community life in nearly every culture. Here are some of the determining factors that have made a tree sacred.

- 1. The tree (whether whole or in part) provides an essential product or service to the community. This may involve using the trunk to build a canoe or the bark and branches to make shelters, baskets, or hunting implements. A tree would be sacred because its roots, bark, leaves, sap, or berries are used for food, oil, or medicine. The Lenape or Delaware**

Indians, who inhabited what is now the northeastern United States, held the white birch to be sacred because it provided them with bark for their boats, homes, and baskets, as well as wood for heating or cooking.

2. The tree is located at or near a sacred river, spring, or well. In many cultures (especially those in arid regions such as Greece and Palestine), water was considered to be the essence of Divine Life, so many springs were regarded as sacred. As an extension of this belief, trees that flourished by underground springs were considered to be repositories of this sacred water. This belief was not restricted to desert areas. In Ireland, many sacred trees are often found planted next to holy wells, a practice which dates back to pre-Christian times.

3. The tree is connected with a sacred animal that may make its home on, under, or within the particular species of tree. Among the early Egyptians, for example, bees were sacred, as they were supposed to have originated from the tears of Re, the Creator and sovereign lord of the sky. Because the bees not only pollinated the trees but made honey (the “nectar of the gods”), the trees they frequented were considered sacred by association. By the same token, any tree that contained a beehive was regarded to be sacred as well. Among the Iroquois, the pine tree is sacred in part because it is associated with both the owl and the eagle, two of the tribe’s most revered animals. Both species are known to make their nests in the tree’s boughs.

4. An individual tree (or species of tree) may be associated with a particular religious or historical event. Because the date palm was used to build King Solomon’s temple, it was held sacred by Jews. Palm leaves are also associated with Christ’s triumphant entry into Jerusalem, so the palm tree has been considered sacred by Christians as well. Carrying the fronds of this tree on Palm Sunday remains an important Christian tradition today. In India, the peepal tree is associated with the Buddha’s enlightenment at Sarnath. Not only is the site of his enlightenment considered a sacred place, but all peepal trees are considered sacred by Buddhists throughout the world.

5. The individual tree (or species of tree) is associated with the appearance of a spirit being, such as a goddess, angel, or other type of tree spirit. Among the Hindus, such trees were known as *devas* (“the shining ones”); among Buddhists, they were called *yakshis* and *yakshas*. In ancient Greece, they were known as *dryads*, while the ancient Slavs called them *leshys*, or “spirits of the forest.” These spirit beings were believed to stand behind the growth and evolution of the tree (or grove of trees) throughout its entire life. Many nature spirits were thought to have a special relationship with human beings as well. It was believed that a tree and its related tree spirit could ensure the success of crops, grant special favors or wishes, aid in the process of healing, insure the finding of a suitable mate and the conception of children, or even open the door to spiritual enlightenment. Although the appearance of tree spirits is beyond the visual range of people except perhaps through clairvoyant perception, many of us can feel their energetic presence when we walk in the forest or come upon an especially old or large tree.

6. The species of tree may have special powers for healing, purification, or enlightenment. According to the *Pen Tsao Ching*, an ancient Chinese herbal, the leaf of the ginkgo tree *Ginkgo biloba* is “good for the heart and lungs.” Recent medical studies show that ginkgo leaf extract may be helpful to patients suffering from stroke, poor circulation, asthma, arthritis, and Alzheimer’s disease. It is one of the most sacred trees in China and Japan, and was once saved from extinction by Buddhist priests.

7. The tree’s indigenous location or the place chosen for its planting is in a sacred ceremonial, purification, or meditation site used for praying, art and dance, healing, spirit quests, or other forms of religious activity. In Japan, sacred trees are often planted next to Shinto temples and shrines, although many temples were actually constructed next to a sacred tree or its ancestor. In Britain, sacred trees (including the yew, rowan and oak) can be found in or near many of the traditional Druid ceremonial sites that dot the landscape. Sacred trees are also found in or around burial sites to acknowledge the ongoing connection between the living and the dead, as well as the people’s belief in regeneration and eternal life.

8. A sacred tree may be in some way distinct from others of its species. The tree may live to a very old age, be unusually large, or have an outstanding shape, appearance, or feature (such as multiple trunks).The tree may also stand alone in an unusual place, such as a promontory point overlooking the ocean (like the Lone Cypress near Monterey, California), on the summit of a mountain (such as the famous *totara* planted on One Tree Hill in Auckland, New Zealand), or in an unusually difficult environment (a large tree growing out of a fissure of a cliff, for example).

9. A special or unusual event is associated with an individual tree or species of tree. The appearance of angels or nature spirits, and communication (in voices, visions, and dreams) and spontaneous acts of healing to humans through trees are still acknowledged in many parts of the world today. The tree may have been chosen as a site for negotiating treaties or dispensing justice, or is associated with other historical events.

10. The tree is considered to be a symbol of fertility or believed to aid in the growth of crops. Dancing around the maypole in Britain and northern Europe can be traced to this ancient belief. In many parts of the world, sacred trees are also believed to favor human fertility, and women have left offerings under certain trees to ensure the birth of many children. In Europe and elsewhere, trees have traditionally been planted to commemorate and symbolize the birth and growth of children.

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