Keep Scotland Beautiful

Your charity for Scotland's environment

Gaelic tree alphabet

Stages: All (EY-S6)

Time: 1-2 hours

Purpose: This resource will help pupils connect to their local nature, whilst learning about an important part of our Gaelic cultural heritage. The activities have been split by age range, and can be adapted to suit individual settings.

Curricular Links

LGL 0-4-06a, 2-06b, 1-4-09a, **SOC** 0-4-02a, 1-3-03a, 1-3-04a, 1-2-07a, 0-4-08a

Introduction

In the ancient Gaelic alphabet, each letter was associated with a tree. As the language is so old, sources do vary as to which trees are associated with which letters and variations may have been used in different parts of Scotland and Ireland. However, a general consensus is given here and is a fantastic way to introduce pupils to Gaelic cultural heritage, whilst establishing a connection to nature that has reduced in recent times. The activities below are split into younger and older pupils and can be adapted to suit your requirements.

Younger pupils (3-7)

1. Go for a walk outside, either within or outside your grounds and try to identify a tree or plant from the Gaelic tree alphabet at the end of this resource. A picture of the tree's leaves is given to help you, but you can also use the Woodland Trust's ID sheets.
2. Take a photo of the tree you find and share it on social media using the tags @KSBScotland and #ForestDay.
3. Back inside, ask pupils what the first letter of their name is. Ask them to find this on the Gaelic tree alphabet and try to copy the rune associated with that letter. If their first initial is not present (several of our modern letters are not represented in the Gaelic alphabet), then they can use the initial of their surname, or any of the trees you identified outside.
4. Use the Learn Gaelic online dictionary to learn the modern Gaelic words for tree and forest and how to pronounce them. You could record yourselves saying the words and share the videos on social media using the tags @KSBScotland and #ForestDay.

LEARNING ABOUT FORESTS

Older pupils (7+)

1. Go for a walk outside, either within or outside your grounds and try to identify as many trees or plants from the Gaelic tree alphabet as you can. You can find the alphabet at the end of this resource. A picture of the tree's leaves is given to help you, but you can also use the [Woodland Trust's ID sheets](#).

2. Take a photo of the trees you find and share them on social media using the tags @KSBScotland and #ForestDay.

3. Back inside, ask pupils to try and write their names, using the runes from the Gaelic Tree Alphabet. Please note that several of our modern English letters are not represented in the Gaelic tree alphabet or in modern Gaelic, so they may need to miss some letters out, or pupils could try to create their own runes for the missing letters.

4. Use the [Learn Gaelic online dictionary](#) to learn how to pronounce the modern Gaelic names for trees. Some of these words have changed since the tree alphabet was used, but others remain the same. You can also use this resource to learn the modern Gaelic words for tree and forest and learn how to pronounce these. You could record yourselves saying the words and share the videos on social media using the tags @KSBScotland and #ForestDay.

5. Use the following questions as the basis for research and discussion in class (notes for teachers are given in italics under the questions):

   a. Why do you think the Gaels used trees as their alphabet? What does this tell us about the Gaels connection to nature?
   Being able to identify and name trees and plants was common knowledge. Everyone would be able to do this easily, as understanding nature was key to survival.

   b. Can you think of any trees that were not part of the Gaelic alphabet? Why do you think these weren't included? Remember that some trees that are common in Scotland today aren't indigenous!
   The trees chosen would have been ones that were common in Gaelic speaking areas during this time period (around 400 – 900 CE). Some trees (chestnut, sycamore) were brought to Scotland in later centuries and so would not have been commonly known at the time of the Gaelic Tree Alphabet.

   c. Trees hold important symbolism in Gaelic culture, which can be seen to this day in poetry and song. Can you find out what the oak tree symbolises in Gaelic culture?
   The oak tree is often used to symbolise strength, resilience, and lasting success. It has often been used in Gaelic poetry and song to praise important people, such as clan chiefs.

   d. Bonus question: Do you think the oak tree is a good choice to represent these features?
   Oak trees can grow to be very big and strong, and the wood of the oak tree is strong and durable.

A Ailm (alam) Elm	**B** Beith (bey) Birch
C Coll (coll) Hazel	**D** Dair (dahr) Oak
E Eadha (eh-yah) Aspen	**F** Feàrn (feyarn) Alder

G Gort (gorsht) Ivy	**H** Uath (oo-ah) Hawthorn
I Iogh (ee-ogh) Yew	**L** Luis (looss) Rowan
M Muin (moon) Vine	**N** Nuin (noon) Ash

O Oir/Onn (oir/awn) Gorse	**P** Peith (pay) Downy birch
R Ruis (roosh) Elder	**S** Suil (sool) Willow
T Teine (chain-uh) Gorse	**U** Ur (oor) Heather

LEARNING ABOUT FORESTS