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DOWN TO EARTH

The Firewood Poem by Celia Congreve

Beechwood fires are bright and clear
If the logs are kept a year,
Chestnut's only good they say,
If for logs 'tis laid away.
Make a fire of Elder tree,
Death within your house will be;
But ash new or ash old,
Is fit for a queen with crown of gold

Birch and fir logs burn too fast
Blaze up bright and do not last,
it is by the Irish said
Hawthorn bakes the sweetest bread.
Elm wood burns like churchyard mould,
E'en the very flames are cold
But ash green or ash brown
Is fit for a queen with golden crown

Poplar gives a bitter smoke,
Fills your eyes and makes you choke,
Apple wood will scent your room
Pear wood smells like flowers in bloom
Oaken logs, if dry and old
keep away the winter's cold
But ash wet or ash dry
a king shall warm his slippers by.



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This medieval Irish poem about trees is taken from a text known as Aidedh Ferghusa meic Léide (the Death of Fergus). In the poem, Iubhdán, the king of the fairies, advises the ruler of Ulster, Fergus mac Léide, on the special qualities of trees and which ones can be burned in the household fire.

irisharchaeology.ie/2017/06/trees-and-the-fairy-king-a-poem-from-early-ireland/

*The pliant woodbine/honeysuckle if thou burn, wailings for misfortune will abound,
Dire extremity at weapons' points or drowning in great waves will follow.
Burn not the precious apple tree of spreading and low-sweeping bough;
Tree ever decked in bloom of white, against whose fair head all men put forth the hand.
The surly blackthorn is a wanderer, a wood that the artificer burns not;
Throughout his body, though it be scanty, birds in their flocks warble.
The noble willow burn not, a tree sacred to poems;
Within his blooms bees are a-sucking, all love the little cage.
The graceful tree with the berries, the wizard's tree, the rowan burn;
But spare the limber tree; burn not the slender hazel.
Dark is the colour of ash; timber that makes the wheels to go;
Rods he furnishes for horsemen's hands, his form turns battle into flight.
Tenterhook among woods the spiteful briar is, burn him that is so keen and green;
He cuts, he flays the foot, him that would advance he forcibly drags backward.
Fiercest heat-giver of all timber is green oak, from him non may escape unhurt;
By partiality for him the head is set on aching, and by his acrid embers the eye is made sore.
Alder, very battle-witch of all woods, tree that is hottest in the fight—
Undoubtedly burn at thy discretion both the alder and whitethorn.
Holly, burn it green; holly, burn it dry;
Of all trees whatsoever the critically best is holly.
Elder that hath tough bark, tree that in truth hurts sore;
Him that furnishes horses to the armies from the sidh (fairies) burn so that he be charred.
The birch as well, if he be laid low, promises abiding fortune;
Burn up most sure and certainly the stakes that bear the constant pods.
Put on the hearth if it so please thee, the russet aspen to come headlong down;
Burn, be it late or early, the tree with the palsied branch.
Patriarch of long-lasting woods is the yew sacred to feasts as it is well known;
Of him now build ye dark-red vats of goodly size.
(Translated from Irish by Standish O'Grady)*