The Mulberry Tree


*Black Mulberry at Charlton House, one of the Great Trees of London, planted 1609-11*

When Roger Saul, founder of the *Mulberry* fashion design company was asked in a BBC radio interview why he’d named his company after the tree, he explained that he was looking for “a very English name”. Indeed, the mulberry tree does conjure up images of idealized Englishness – eating scones and jam in its shade on a summer’s day, or young children dancing happily around a mulberry bush.

The tree has become so linked with childhood that dozens of schools have ‘Mulberry’ in their name. Many, like the Camden School for Girls, Grey Coat Hospital, and Saul’s own boarding school, (Kingswood School in Bath), have their own mulberry tree. When the Admiralty requisitioned Kingswood during WWII, it was here that engineers developed the Mulberry Harbours used in the D-Day landings. But, of course, the mulberry tree is not a native English tree at all.

There are, in fact, several kinds of mulberry tree, roughly categorised as black, white, or red, each native to a different part of the world, even if some species have become naturalised almost everywhere. They are all members of the *Morus* genus and part of the vast *Moraceae* family, which includes the fig.

Over 90 per cent of all mulberry trees in Britain – and perhaps 99 per cent of all veteran mulberry trees here – are black mulberries (*Morus nigra*). Charlton’s celebrated mulberry is a fine, ancient
example of the species. Usually grown for their juicy, dark-purple fruit, spreading shade and gnarled, ancient-looking appearance (even when they’re young), black mulberries were introduced to England by the Romans in the first century AD. Mineralized mulberry pips have been found at archaeological sites near London Bridge, as well as at Silchester (Hampshire), and York. It’s still not known if these pips came from trees that the Romans had planted or were from fruit imported as syrups and jams.

The white mulberry, *Morus alba*, is best known for its leaves, which are used to feed silkworms for silk. The species is native to China, where the techniques for reeling silkworm cocoons into thread and weaving silk first emerged, over 4,700 years ago – and remained secret for 2,700 years. Over the past 2,000 years, as the ‘secret of silk’ spread westward, so the white mulberry tree followed, and is now naturalised in Europe and much of North America, where it has become an unwanted, ‘invasive alien’, hybridising with the native red mulberry and threatening it with extinction. The fruit, unlike that of the black mulberry, can be dried and ground into flour, and is exported around the world from countries like Turkey. White mulberry wood from a few volcanic islands in Japan is used for exquisite furniture and is the rarest and most expensive timber in the world.

The mulberry fruit is strictly speaking not a ‘berry’ at all, but a cluster of tiny drupes (a hard seed surrounded by flesh), each formed from a little female flower. Most mulberries have both male and female flowers on the same tree. The male flowers carry the pollen and resemble dangling catkins, while the female flowers look like white/green mulberries, with little ‘bunny ear’ tentacles on top, which collect the pollen. Mulberries don’t need to be pollinated to form fruit, but the seeds won’t be fertile.

*Male flowers (catkins) of Morus nigra*
Female flowers of Morus nigra. These will turn into “mulberries”

Mulberries were grown in England throughout the Middle Ages, particularly in the Infirmary orchards of monasteries. When Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in the 1530s, most of these were lost, but remnants of a medieval orchard have survived at Syon House, which I am currently documenting. Old mulberries marking disappeared monastery orchards can be found at Lesnes Abbey, Charterhouse, St Bartholomew-the-Great Priory, Westminster Abbey, and other sites.

In some cases the original tree will have gone into decline and rotted away, but black mulberries have the capacity to regenerate through ‘layering’ - producing genetically identical regrowth from the bole. So what we see today can often be a ‘Phoenix’ tree that has regrown from the roots of the original.
The watershed moment for the widespread cultivation of mulberries was the result of a 1609 letter from James I to the Lords Lieutenant of the Shires to encourage landowners to plant thousands of mulberry trees in order to start a silk industry here, so that the country would no longer have to import expensive silk from Italy, France, China, the Middle East and Spain. Several landowners followed James’s own example and planted hundreds (if not thousands) of mulberry saplings.

The King used the grounds of Charlton House – built between 1607-1612 for the tutor of his son, Henry Prince of Wales – for such a plantation. This was only grubbed out in 1821, with Charlton’s Great Tree of London now the only survivor. James and his consort, Anne of Denmark, also planted hundreds – if not thousands – of mulberries at their palaces at Theobalds, Oatlands and Greenwich. Any old mulberries here today are mostly only symbolically related to their illustrious ancestors, though the Charlton mulberry is likely one of the original trees.

James’s silk venture in England soon fizzled out, probably because of the damp, cold climate – Frost Fairs were held on the frozen Thames in the 17th century – as well as a lack of expertise in raising silkworms. James soon focused his silk project on the new colonies of America, which had a much more favourable climate. We know from archives that James’s agents imported both white and black mulberries. It was known at the time that silkworms prefer the leaves of white mulberries and would also eat black mulberry leaves, though the resulting silk is coarser.
Only the black mulberry trees have survived, however, with ancient specimens in Jacobean gardens all over the country, including those of some colleges in Oxford and Cambridge (like the famous Milton Mulberry at Christ’s College, Cambridge). There was a mulberry plantation near the King’s palace at St James’, now the site of Buckingham Palace, which houses the National Mulberry Collection.

Mulberry trees have continued to be planted for their fruit and landscape value ever since. These old mulberry trees serve as living reminders of a past that has long disappeared under cycles of destruction and development, and are being documented by the Morus Londinium project, which I co-founded in 2016 with the Conservation Foundation (www.moruslondinium.org).

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