



The plants of J.R.R. Tolkien's legendarium

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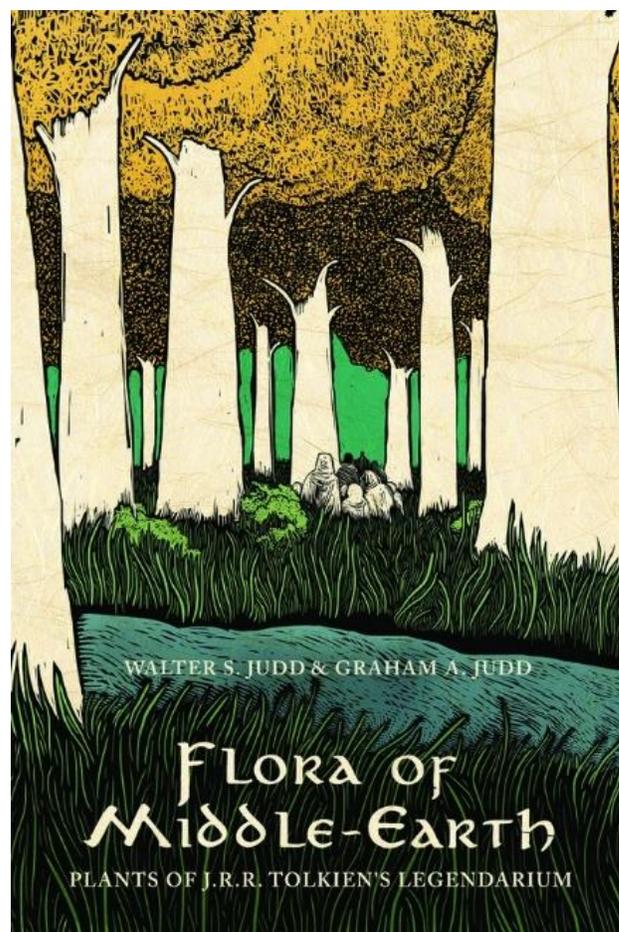
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Many readers of *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings* believe that the events of these books occur in an imaginary world and thus have no connection with the world around us. However, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien sought to correct this misconception, stating that Middle-earth "is just the use of Middle English *middle-erde* (or *erthe*), altered from Old English *Middangeard*: the name for the inhabited lands of Men 'between the seas.'" He went on to say that "imaginatively this 'history' is supposed to take place in a period of the actual Old World of this planet" (Tolkien, 1981, Letter No. 165). His writings should not be considered escapist, but instead are meant to reconnect us to important elements of our internal and cultural landscape. They should also influence how we interact with other individuals and with the world in which we live — including the landscapes of our natural environment — and especially plants! The importance of plants in the Tolkien's Middle-earth is thus considered in detail in our book, *Flora of Middle-Earth: Plants of J.R.R. Tolkien's Legendarium*, recently published by Oxford University Press (Judd & Judd, 2017), which we introduce here, along with an introduction to

the importance of plants in connection with Tolkien's imaginative world.



Flora of Middle-Earth (book cover, showing forest of Lothlórien).

Our book focuses on one of the major components of our environment — the Green Plants — organisms to which many in our modern, highly technological world have become blind (Wandersee & Schussler, 2001; Allen, 2003). Indeed, some have argued that we are now disconnected from the entire natural world (Yoon, 2009). Plants are ecologically diverse and range dramatically in size — from microscopic, aquatic, green algae to the tallest flowering trees or conifers. They are critically important in maintaining a healthy biosphere — and in fact, without plants, animal (and, of course, human) life would be impossible. They provide our food, construction materials for our homes, add beauty to our surroundings, and even provide the air we breathe. In Tolkien's legendarium, plants are the primary concern of Yavanna Kementári, the Giver of Fruits and wife of Aulë, who has lordship over all the substances of which the Earth is made. As related in *The Silmarillion*, she is the “lover of all things that grow in the earth, and all their countless forms she holds in her mind, from the trees like towers in forests ... to the moss upon stones or the small and secret things in the mould” (*Valaquenta*: p. 27). Understandably, she is held in great reverence by the elves, as are the natural environments she oversees. We believe Tolkien's reference was comparable.

Tolkien's descriptions of Middle-earth are richly detailed, including succinct verbal sketches of many of its plants, and thus create a realistic stage for his dramas. His detailed treatment of plants plays a major role in the creation of this stage — providing the distinctive landscapes and natural locales of Middle-earth — from the tundra and ice-fields of the north, to

the extensive prairies of Rohan, and the coniferous forests of Dorthonion, as well as the broad-leaved forests of Doriath or Fangorn and wetlands such as the Gladden Fields. The dominant species within each plant community are always mentioned, especially the trees, which Tolkien, like Yavanna, held most dear (see *The Silmarillion*: chapter 2). Thus, it is critical for our appreciation and understanding of Middle-earth to envision these scenes accurately. These plants, however, do more than merely provide descriptive detail, enhancing the veracity of the tales of Middle-earth. The plants within Tolkien's legendarium are actually part of the story, and in ways that are more deeply significant than merely evident in the actions of Ents — anthropomorphized trees — that “speak on behalf of all things that have roots, and punish those that wrong them” (*The Silmarillion*: p. 45). Their significance can be seen in the numerous connections between plants and important individuals in the myths and history of Middle-earth. For example, in the First Age (and earlier), how are we to understand the Two Trees of Valinor, fashioned by Yavanna, and why is it important that Thingol, the elven ruler of Doriath, was called the king of beech, oak, and elm? Why was his daughter, Lúthien, when first observed by Beren, dancing among the hemlock-umbels under the beeches of Neldoreth? And what is the link between her feet and the leaves of lindens? Why did hawthorns obscure the entrance to the Hidden Kingdom of Gondolin? During the Second Age, why did the elves give Aldarion, soon to become the sixth king of Númenor, a White Tree — Nimloth — and what is the connection between this tree and the White Trees of Gondor? Why

did the elves bring to Númenor several different fragrant trees from Eressëa — and what did these trees look like? In the Third Age, how was pipe-weed integral to the culture of the Shire, and why was athelas (kingsfoil) useful in the hands of the king of Gondor? How did these two herbs get to Middle-earth? What is the connection of willows and the Withywindle valley (in the Old Forest), and should willows, therefore, be viewed negatively? Why does Quickbeam love rowan-trees, and why were mallorn-trees important to Galadriel and the elves of Lothlórien? What did mallorn-trees look like? And finally, how should we envision the herbs elanor and niphredil, and what made these two plants so sacred to the elves? Of course many additional questions come quickly to mind, and we deal with these in our book.

It is obvious from even a cursory reading of *The Lord of the Rings* that the book was written by a person who was botanically knowledgeable — but more than that — a writer who really loved plants! (In fact his introduction to the world of plants occurred very early in his life when he was taught botany by his mother.) But we don't need to merely accept this from our interpretations of his writings. Tolkien tells us of his appreciation of plants. He said in his letter to the Houghton Mifflin Co.: "I am (obviously) much in love with plants and above all trees, and always have been; and I find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals" (Tolkien, 1981: Letter No. 164). We agree: his love of plants is obvious, and it is apparent on nearly every page of *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*. Only a writer whose eyes were open to the diversity of the natural world could have accomplished such

a task — closely integrating plants into his imagined world, and, as a result, including nearly all the trees of England (and also most European trees) within the Middle-earth of the First through the Third Ages. Because the species of trees (as well as shrubs and herbs) growing in England and other European regions are for the most part members of widely distributed genera that also occur in temperate North America and Asia, especially eastern and southeastern Asia, we can find the plants of Tolkien's Middle-earth in the forests and fields around our homes. Thus, a major goal of this book, in addition to increasing our appreciation of the imagined landscapes of Middle-earth, is to increase our respect for and understanding of the plants that grow in the natural environments that exist around us. Tolkien appreciated the beauty and diversity of the natural world, and its destruction through urbanization and industrialization angered him (unfortunately, modern followers of Saruman are not hard to find!). Thus, one of our goals is to increase the visibility of and love for plants in our modern culture. And, taking the Ents (*i.e.*, sentient trees, indwelt by spirits "summoned from afar"; *The Silmarillion*: p. 45) as our role-models, we hope to foster the desire to protect the forests and meadows near our homes (and across the world). Finally, the wild plants of forest and field are not our only concern. In our book we have also described the cultivated plants of vegetable and flower gardens as well as agricultural fields, addressing the interesting and long history of plants and people (or hobbits and elves!). We should appreciate not only wild plants (as do the Ents) but also the plants of orchards and cultivated fields (like the Entwives). In the end,

the fact that an investigation of the plants of Tolkien's Middle-earth reconnects us with the plants of our own world should not be surprising. Tolkien, in his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, said that "Recovery" is one of the goals of fantasy, and by this he meant "a re-gaining — regaining of a clear view" and "seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them." Thus, in "experiencing the fantastic, we recover a fresh view of the unfantastic, a view too long dulled by familiarity" (Flieger, 2002: chapter 3).

If the plants of Tolkien's legendarium are the trees, shrubs, and herbs of our own world, one might ask: What about plants such as elanor, niphredil, alfirin, simbelmynë, mallorn-trees, or the White Tree of Gondor? Are these simply the creation of Tolkien's imagination, or do they also have links to our own world. The answer, we think, is both — certainly these plants, as Tolkien explained, "are lit by a light that would not be seen ever in a growing plant" (Tolkien, 1981: Letter No. 312) in our world — so they arise, some more and others less, out of his imagination and are used in specific ways in the story in order to clarify aspects of elven, human, or hobbit culture. They are artistic creations, enhancing the wonder and mystery of Tolkien's imaginative world. But it is also important to keep in mind that perhaps all of the imaginative plants of Middle-earth are based, at least in part, on species of our own world. For example, Tolkien suggested that niphredil — if seen in the light of our world — would be "simply a delicate kin of a snowdrop," while elanor would be "a pimpernel (perhaps a little enlarged) growing sun-golden flowers and star-silver ones on the same plant" (Tolkien, 1981: Letter No. 312). As early as 1956, Tolkien commented that

"Botanists want a more accurate description of the mallorn, of elanor, niphredil, alfirin, mallos, and simbelmynë" (Tolkien, 1981: Letter No. 187), and we trust that many readers today have a similar desire. We have, therefore, done the necessary detective work to connect these imaginative plants with their sources and provide such accurate descriptions. We believe that this botanical knowledge will enrich the experience of those who have read (or are reading) Tolkien's works. Our book explores the interactions between plants and the speaking-peoples of Middle-earth — such as humans, hobbits, elves, or ents — whether such plants are the common oaks, pines, or grasses found in the sunlight of our world or are those plants lit by a more imaginative light, such as niphredil or elanor. Thus, we attempt in our book to synthesize information from diverse realms: Tolkien's writings, etymology (the evolution of words), botany and plant systematics (the study of plants and their evolutionary relationships), and artistic endeavors. We hope that Tolkien would approve of our attempt, as he suggested that the gold and silver light of Valinor, pouring from the Two Trees (Telperion and Laurelin), represents the "light of art undivorced from reason, that sees things both scientifically ... and imaginatively" (Tolkien, 1981: Letter No. 131).

In the book we provide detailed treatments of the 141 plants of Middle-earth, and for each of the 100 most important plants of Tolkien's imaginative world, we include (1) the common and scientific names, along with an indication of the family to which the plant belongs; (2) a brief quote from one of Tolkien's works in which the plant is referenced; (3) a discussion of the significance of the plant in the context of

Tolkien's legendarium; (4) the etymology, relating to both the English common name and the Latin (or Latinized) scientific name, and where relevant, the name in one or more of the languages of Middle-earth; (5) a brief description of the plant's geographical distribution and ecology; (6) its economic

importance; and (7) a brief description of the plant. Most of these also are provided with a woodcut-style illustration (as an aid to identification), along with an inset illustrating one of the events in the history of Middle-earth in which the plant played a role.



Niphredil (based upon the snowdrop, *Galanthus nivalis*, in the plant family Amaryllidaceae) with inset (vignette) showing Aragorn and Arwen on Cerin Amroth. Illustration from *Flora of Middle-Earth*.

It is our goal that the inset illustrations (vignettes) be functional, decorative, and fit visually into the lore of Middle Earth. By abstracting the images with a woodblock aesthetic, Graham, the second author and illustrator, was able to simplify the complexity of the plant pictured, providing a clearer view of the diagnostic features of each plant than a photograph would have offered. In his botanical illustrations, only the information needed to identify each plant is provided, and this same concept inspired his approach to the vignettes and narratives depicted. The tales and lore of Arda have been imagined by all of us, conceived and casted in movies, and depicted by talented and amazing artists. From the Hildebrandt brothers to Cor Blok, these artists and actors have shaded our original conceptions of what these characters, such as Bilbo or Gandalf, look like. Because of this we seek to create an abstracted view, offering silhouettes rife with symbols, pulling heavily on descriptions from the Tolkien's books to color our conceptualization of these well-fabricated characters. Keeping Tolkien's concerns in mind, we do not want to infringe on the viewer's ideation of the characters, but we feel it is very important to provide the framework for people to see the narrative, while still allowing them to project their own conceptualizations onto the image.

Traditionally, when we think of fantasy illustrations, we think of images framed like classic historical paintings or Greek dramas. By focusing on the flora over the fauna, we had to restructure how we approached the composition of each scene. So often plants are only the background that our grand actors stride

across, but in contrast, we want to highlight how these narratives played out in the botanically rich and vibrant world that Tolkien imagined. This led Graham to a fundamental restructuring of the composition of each image, so the action or drama of the characters is often deemphasized, with the vignette focusing on how the action would have settled into the environment.

In conclusion, we hope that our book will create a visual reference — and legitimacy — for both the plants growing in our forests, meadows, and marshes, as well as those that we have received as gifts from Tolkien's imagination.

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