

Tree of (outdoor) life



Francis Smith introduces the Common Lime as an all-year-round inspiration for outdoor play and learning



Park outings are great fun for under-fives. They provide important opportunities to sprint, shout and get muddy. They are also ideal for pupils to connect with nature in a way that is often difficult in a school garden. Trees, and in particular, the ubiquitous Common Lime (*Tilia x europaea*), are visually inspiring and provide fantastic springboards for exciting year-round, nature-based investigation. Here's what you and your pupils have to look forward to.

Spring

The emergence of beautifully soft, heart-shaped leaves mark the end of the Common Lime's winter dormancy. These leaves mature quickly to a 10cm length and their undersides are often covered with downy white hair. The prominent veins mean these leaves are great for leaf printing, a great way for pupils to begin familiarising themselves with the tree. The Lime's leaves also play host to the Lime Hawk Moth caterpillar. This munching minibeast is recognisable by the distinct horn on its head and can be seen building its chrysalis as the year progresses.

Summer

Now's the time to look out for your Lime tree's clusters of small, white flowers. While they may not win any floral beauty awards, they are a great way of demonstrating to pupils that flowers come in all shapes and sizes.

The flower's male and female anatomy are very pronounced and rich in both nectar and pollen. Quick, pupil-led observations of these flowers will help create a grounding in the remarkable theme of pollination. The presence of hungry bees to-and-froing from the tree also provides an opportunity for a practitioner to discuss honey creation.

Leaves can again become a focal point for your investigations as, during summer they are often crawling with sap-sucking aphids. Aphids are fascinating to investigate, as their presence often attracts a range of other animals, interested in eating them (wasps) and their honeydew poo (ants and hoverflies).

Autumn

In early autumn, you will find your Common Lime tree adorned with curious wings, from which hang a number of small balls. These are the lime fruit (inedible), patiently waiting for a gust of wind to send them spiralling gracefully away from their parent tree down to a

welcoming patch of soil. Why not let these be the catalyst for an investigation into seed dispersal? Similarly, help pupils observe and understand the reason for autumnal changes in leaf colour as your Lime tree turns a lovely buttery yellow.

Winter

The Common Lime is large enough (it can grow up to 40m in height) to sustain mammal life, and this becomes most apparent during the winter months. Encourage pupils to peer carefully up into the tree's now bare canopy. You will often see dense clusters of dead twigs and leaves, particularly in the main tree forks. These are squirrel houses, or dreys. Dreys are often beautifully crafted structures and are occupied by a male and a female. Dreys may also feature two entrances; a front door and an escape hatch. Once pupils have learnt about dreys, a fun, warming activity is to help them create their own using the dead natural materials always in ready supply around a wintery park. ■

- From his base at Studio Cultivate, Francis Smith runs practical, outdoor lessons, teaching young children how to grow and nurture plants, creating vibrant, productive garden spaces.
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