The Guardian

one stop english

Four reasons trees are more like humans than you think

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- What do you already know about how trees live and survive in forests?
- Do you think trees can communicate with one another in any way? Why or why not?

2 Key words

a. Find the words in the article. Then match them to the definitions.

shade	beneficial	saplings	soil
bark	acorns	fungi	wrinkled
nutrients	habitats	offspring	
detect	branches	underground networks	

1. young trees that are still small and growing _____
2. the hard part that protects the outside of a tree _____
3. connected systems that exist below the surface of the earth _____
4. small nuts that grow on oak trees, often eaten by squirrels _____
5. children or young of a person, animal or plant _____
6. helpful or producing good results _____
7. the dark layer of earth in which plants grow _____
8. the parts of a tree that grow out from the trunk and have leaves on them _____
9. to discover or notice something, especially something that is not easy to see or hear _____
10. an area that is darker and cooler because sunlight is blocked by something _____
11. natural places where animals or plants normally live _____

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12. substances that living things need to grow and stay healthy _____
13. having small lines on the surface of something, often because of age _____
14. living organisms that are not plants or animals and that include mushrooms _____

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity in the correct form.

1. The forest floor was covered with _____ that had fallen from the oak trees.
2. Scientists have discovered that trees communicate through _____ of fungi.
3. We planted several _____ along the edge of the garden, hoping they would grow into tall trees.
4. Birds build their nests in the _____ of trees, high above the ground.
5. The thick _____ of the ancient tree had deep lines and cracks.
6. Woods and forests are important _____ for foxes, badgers and rabbits.
7. Mushrooms and toadstools are both types of _____.
8. My great-grandmother has grey hair and a beautiful, _____ face.
9. The quality of the _____ is important in helping plants grow.
10. Regular exercise is _____ for both physical and mental health.
11. Dogs can _____ smells that humans cannot.
12. Plants need sunlight, water and _____ to help them grow.
13. We sat in the _____ of a large tree to escape the midday heat.
14. Most animals will do anything to protect their _____ from danger.

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Ecologist and natural history presenter Mike Dilger shares four remarkable facts on the inner workings of trees, from their ability to share resources to the existence of their very own social networks

Mike Dilger

21 October, 2025

1 In the past, animals and plants were believed by scientists to be completely different. But if we look more closely, it appears that we have far more in common with trees than we think.

2 **Trees can warn one another of danger**

While trees don't produce sounds, they are still capable of communicating important messages for the good of their own community.

3 Acacia trees in Africa are able to produce a gas to warn other trees close by that their leaves are under attack from hungry giraffes. When they detect this gas, the neighbouring trees start releasing chemicals into their own leaves to prevent the giraffes from eating them.

4 Elms and pines under attack from caterpillars are capable of sending out chemicals that attract wasps. These wasps lay their eggs inside the caterpillars, which eat them from the inside out. This strategy is not only unpleasant for the caterpillars but beneficial for the trees themselves.

5 **Trees have their own 'social network'**

The internet has become the main way that humans exchange information. Trees also share information with fungi. In return for a regular supply of plant sugar produced by the tree, some fungi will provide access to water, via their underground networks. They will also increase the amount of essential nutrients, such as nitrogen, in the water so that the trees stay healthy. Fungi can also help send stress signals between trees, much like Facebook or X are used by humans. This allows the trees to access important resources to help them survive.

6 **Mother trees look after their young**

Unless birds or mammals carry them away, most acorns, for example, will grow where they fall, which is usually under the branches of the mother tree.

7 Young trees grow slowly in their early years, so the mother tree keeps her offspring in the shade. Under beech trees, for example, only 3 per cent of the light reaches the forest floor, which stops the saplings from growing too quickly.

8 The mother tree is also in contact with her saplings via their connected root systems. This is a way of helping the young tree survive.

9 **Their ageing process mimics ours**

While humans have skin, trees have bark. Bark protects the tree from harmful chemicals. When trees are in the 'active growth' phase, they lose their bark in the same way that we lose our skin cells on a daily basis. Like human skin, a tree's bark can become wrinkled with age. In one further similarity, as trees become very old, they stop growing taller and start getting fatter. Their branches begin to drop and fungi begin to attack the wood. But when the tree finally dies, its body will still play an important role by releasing nutrients into the soil and creating habitats for plants, fungi and animals.

First published in *The Guardian,* 21/10/2025

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3 Comprehension check

a. Read the article and choose the correct answer (a, b or c).

1. According to paragraph 1, scientists used to believe that ...

   a. trees and humans were very similar.

   b. animals and plants had nothing in common.

   c. trees could communicate with each other.

2. What happens when acacia trees detect the warning gas from other trees?

   a. They produce sounds to scare away the giraffes.

   b. They attract wasps to attack the giraffes.

   c. They release chemicals to make their leaves taste bad.

3. What do trees give to fungi in exchange for water and nutrients?

   a. sugar produced by the tree

   b. access to their root systems

   c. protection from harmful chemicals

4. Why do mother trees keep their saplings in the shade?

   a. to prevent them from growing too fast

   b. to protect them from birds and mammals

   c. to help them produce more sugar

5. According to the article, what do trees and humans have in common as they age?

   a. They both lose the ability to communicate.

   b. They both get wider and develop wrinkles.

   c. They both become resistant to disease.

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6. What happens when a tree dies?

   a. It stops providing any benefit to the environment.

   b. Fungi immediately destroy all of its bark.

   c. Its nutrients help other living things in the area.

4 Key language

a. Find the phrases in the article and complete each gap with one word.

1. have something in _____ with
2. in contact _____
3. in return _____
4. _____ an important role in
5. under _____ from

b. Write the phrases from task a next to the correct definition.

1. given as payment or exchange for something _____
2. being harmed or threatened by someone or something _____
3. to share similar features or interests with someone or something _____
4. communicating with someone _____
5. to be an important part of something _____

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- After reading this article, has your perception of trees changed? In what way?
- If you could ask a tree one question, what would it be and why?

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6 In your own words

a. Imagine trees have their own social media platform called 'The Wood Wide Web'. Work in small groups to create a social media post that a tree might share with its network.

Step 1: Choose one of the following scenarios for your post:

- a warning about a threat (e.g. insects, disease, humans)
- a request for help (e.g. needing water, nutrients, sunlight)
- an offer to share resources with a neighbour
- an announcement about a new sapling in the community

Step 2: Decide on the details:

- What type of tree is posting? (e.g. oak, beech, acacia, pine)
- Where is the tree located? (e.g. forest, park, city street)
- What tone will your post have? (e.g. urgent, friendly, humorous)

Step 3: Write your post. Include:

- a short message
- at least one hashtag
- an emoji if appropriate

b. Present your post to the class. Explain why your tree is sharing this message and how other trees in the network might respond.