The Guardian

one stop english

Four reasons trees are more like humans than you think

Level 1: Elementary

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- What do you already know about trees?
- 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.

fungi	resources	nutrients	wrinkled
attract	detect	underground networks	
caterpillars	habitats	shade	

1. living things like mushrooms that are not plants or animals _____
2. having lines on the surface; not smooth _____
3. the good things in food that help living things grow and stay healthy _____
4. to make someone or something come closer or be interested _____
5. a cool, dark place where the sun can't reach _____
6. connections under the ground that you cannot see _____
7. to notice or find something that is difficult to see _____
8. useful things that you need, like water and food _____
9. small, soft animals that become butterflies _____
10. the natural places where animals and plants live _____

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. Forests and woods are the natural _____ of many different animals and plants.
2. Bees help _____ other bees to flowers by doing a special dance.

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3. The old man had a(n) _____ face from many years in the sun.
4. We sat in the _____ to get away from the heat of the sun.
5. Plants get the _____ they need from the soil.
6. Trees use _____ to share water and food with each other.
7. _____ change into beautiful butterflies.
8. Scientists can _____ pollution in the air with special equipment.
9. Not all _____, such as mushrooms are safe to eat.
10. We must protect the Earth's natural _____, such as water.

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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, scientists believed that animals and plants were completely different. But now we understand that humans have a number of things in common with trees.

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

Although trees don't produce sounds, they can still communicate important messages to one another. Acacia trees in Africa are able to produce a gas to warn other trees that hungry giraffes are nearby and may eat their leaves. When they detect this gas, the trees release chemicals into their own leaves so the giraffes don't eat them.

3 Elms and pines under attack from caterpillars send out chemicals that attract wasps. These wasps lay their eggs inside the caterpillars, which eat them from the inside out. This isn't very nice for the caterpillars, but it is good for the trees themselves.

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

Trees share things with fungi. They produce plant sugar, which they share with the fungi. The fungi allow the trees to get water through their underground networks. They also increase the amount of important nutrients, such as nitrogen, in the water so that the trees stay healthy.

5 **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.

6 Young trees grow stronger and live longer if they grow slowly in their early years, so the mother tree keeps her them in the shade. Under beech trees, for example, only 3 per cent of the light reaches the ground, which stops the trees from growing too quickly. The mother tree also connects to the young trees via their roots. This is a way of helping the young tree survive.

7 **Their ageing process mimics ours**

While humans have skin, trees have bark. Bark protects the tree from harmful chemicals. When trees are growing, they lose their bark in the same way that we lose our skin cells every day. Like human skin, a tree's bark can become wrinkled with age.

8 Like humans, as trees become very old, they stop growing taller and start getting fatter. But when the tree finally dies, its body will release nutrients into the soil and create habitats for plants, fungi and animals.

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3 Comprehension check

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

1. How do acacia trees warn other trees about danger?
   a. They make loud sounds.
   b. They produce a special gas.
   c. They move their branches.
2. What do wasps do to help elm and pine trees?
   a. They eat the trees' leaves.
   b. They carry water to the trees.
   c. They lay eggs inside caterpillars.
3. What do fungi give to trees through underground networks?
   a. plant sugar
   b. water and nutrients
   c. shade and protection
4. Why do mother trees keep young trees in the shade?
   a. to stop them growing too quickly
   b. to help them make more leaves
   c. to protect them from animals
5. What happens when a tree dies?
   a. Its bark releases harmful chemicals.
   b. Insects destroy all of its branches.
   c. Its nutrients help other living things in the area.

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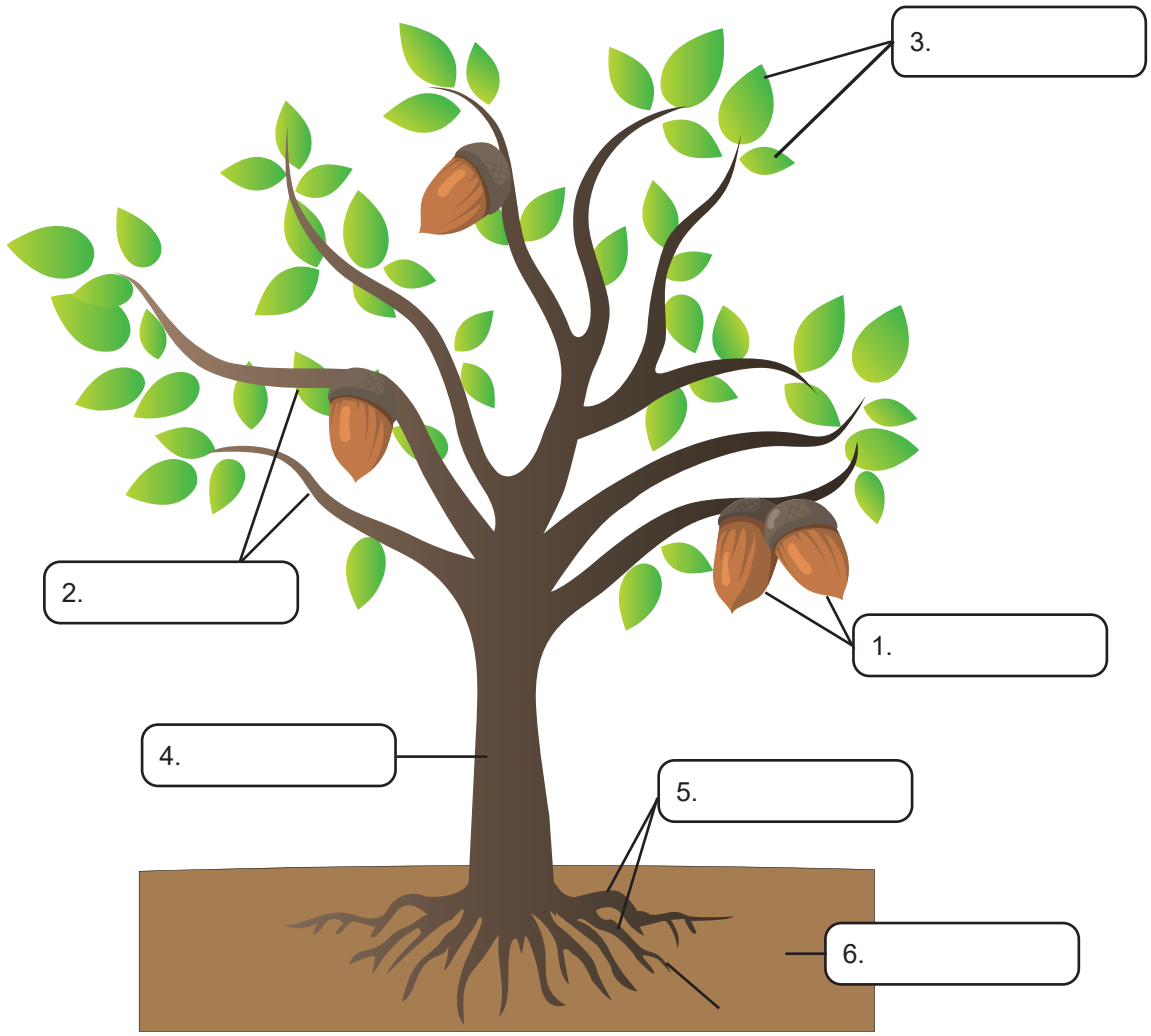
4 Key language

a. Find the tree words in the article and label the picture.

bark | roots | branches | leaves | acorns | soil



b. Match the tree words from task a to the correct definition.

1. the brown earth where trees grow _____
2. small brown nuts that fall from oak trees _____
3. the parts of a tree that grow under the ground _____

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4. the flat green parts that grow on trees and plants _____
5. the hard outside part of a tree _____
6. parts of a tree that grow out from the main part _____

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- After reading the article, have your ideas about trees changed? In what way?
- If you could ask a tree one question, what would it be and why?

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 tree 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.