

Acanthus spinosus

[Synonyms : *Acanthus spinosissimus*]

ACANTHUS is a perennial. Native to south-eastern Europe it has white and purple flowers. It is also known as Bear's breech, *Paznehtuik osnity* (Czech), Spine acanthus, and Spiny bear's breech; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of artifice, 'the giver and receiver are inseparable', the fine arts, and love of art.

Spinosus is Latin (thorn, spine) meaning 'spiny' with reference to the leaves.

This thorny plant was originally classified as a thistle.

Callimachus, the 3rd Century BC Greek architect, is said to have visited the grave of a young girl (some say his daughter) who had died on her wedding eve. The story continued that an acanthus plant (believed more likely to have been bear's breech, *Acanthus mollis* by some authorities) was growing nearby and a previous mourner had left a basket covered with a tile standing on it. The pressure of the tile had pushed the leaves into an attractive shape and seeing this Callimachus is said to have drawn inspiration from it for the decorations on the classical capitals of a temple being built at that time in Corinth. From then on this decoration was used on many buildings by both the ancient Greeks and the Romans and also in the designs of and on furniture, and on clothing. The acanthus pattern even came to be used in due time for the shape of cup handles. Even in the 19th Century the leaves continued to be a favourite motif and were used by the English craftsman, poet and socialist, William Morris (1834-1896) in designs that remain popular today. (Perhaps it should be mentioned here that some authorities challenge the recognition of any acanthus species as the source of inspiration for the traditional design and suggest that it was more likely to have been the similarly shaped leaf of the cardoon, *Cynara cardunculus*.)

There is still some debate as to when acanthus was first introduced to England. Although some authorities believe it appeared there in the 16th Century (or even as late as 1629) it would seem that records dating back to around 1200 could indicate a much earlier arrival.

Its symbolism in early Christian art is given to typifying plants in the garden of heaven. This is yet another of the several plants said to have been used to make the Crown of Thorns worn by Jesus at the Crucifixion.

Today flower arrangers can find acanthus an invaluable component in dried Winter flower arrangements.

Medicinally, the leaves have been used by herbalists in the past to treat burns, cramp, gout and stomach disorders – and even to aid in the healing of broken bones.

It is the birthday flower for 23rd December.