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Buxus sempervirens

BOX is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to North Africa, western Asia and Europe, it has tiny pale yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as *Auscio* (Italian), *Bocyswydden* (Welsh), *Boj* (Spanish), *Bosso* (Italian), *Bossolo* (Italian), *Bouisque* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Box tree, Boxwood, *Buchs* (German), *Buchsbaum* (German), *Buis* (French), *Buisse* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Buis toujours vert* (French), *Bukso ordinara* (Esperanto), Bush tree, *Busso* (Italian), *Buxbaum* (German), *Buxbom* (Swedish), *Buxus* (Dutch), Common box, Dudgeon, Dutch box, Edging box, English boxwood, *Isopuksipuu* (Finnish), *Krušpán vždyzelený* (Slovak), *Martello* (Italian), *Palm* (Dutch), *Palmboompje* (Dutch), *Pyxari* (Greek), *Simsir ag* (Turkish), *Zimostráz pušpan* (Czech), *Zimostráz obecný* (Czech), and *Zimostráz vždyzelený* (Czech); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of gossiping, grace, prosperity, and stoicism (tree).

Warning – all parts of the plant are poisonous, especially the leaves. It can cause vomiting, diarrhoea, purging, dilated pupils, headache, severe abdominal pain, convulsions, respiratory failure and death. Box can also cause dermatitis. Animals, which will normally avoid it, have died from eating the leaves. (Camels, which are not immune to its poisonous qualities, are said to be especially partial to the leaves – so much so that it was rumoured that some caravans which passed through areas where box was prolific had to be ‘animalled’ by horses, mules or oxen.)

Box in Britain is considered to be endangered in the wild.

The leaves of box have been confused with those of the cowberry (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*, which have fine teeth and glandular brown dots beneath) and of bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*, which do not have a notch cut at the tip).

Sempervirens is made up of Latin *semper* (always) and *vivo* (to live, be alive) components meaning ‘evergreen’.

In the Old Testament of the *Bible*, Isaiah speaks of growing the box tree in the desert, authorities suggest in the context of revitalization. For the ancient Greeks however records show that the tree had funereal connotations and was dedicated to Pluto, god of the Underworld. The Romans dedicated box to Mercury, messenger of the gods and it therefore featured in various Roman civic and religious ceremonies.

Some authorities believe that it was the Romans who introduced the tree to Britain while others suspect they may have found evidence of box from earlier times. Certainly archaeologists have found Roman coffins lined with box sprigs on several excavation sites in England and use of box in mourning rituals was still familiar in more recent centuries in that Country. In 19th Century northern England mourners took a spray of box from a basin of pieces placed by the door of the house and these would then be thrown into the open grave. In contrast in the South of England there is a beauty spot even today named after it in the county of Surrey – Box Hill. The area was a renowned pleasure resort in the 17th Century where ladies and gentlemen of the fashionable set could lose themselves and happily dally in its secluded thickets. However by the mid-18th Century such sport had been severely curtailed as by then much of the woodland had succumbed to the axe. (Records show that the boxwood sold in 1715 was valued at £3,000 – and one hundred

years later, £10,000.)

In England the box has been tied in with several Christian festivals. Branches used to be gathered for decorating the hearth at Whitsun, and instead of willow (*Salix*) as today the box tree was used by churchmen for making crosses for Palm Sunday. The Domesday records collected around 1086 show also that a landlord would accept a bundle of box twigs on Palm Sunday as part of his tenant's payment.

In Europe it was once thought that to dream of box foretold prosperity, a happy marriage and long life. However in England there have been some who would have been horrified if box had crossed their threshold and subscribed to the saying

Bring box into the house, take a box out.

This foreboding element is contrasted with Persian literature which promotes the box tree's elegance and compares it to a woman's grace.

Box is an emblem of the Scottish MacIntosh clan.

The 16th and 17th Centuries in England saw a craze for clipping trees into different shapes ie. topiary, and the box tree was one of the favourite shrubs for this pursuit. The box was also one of the plants used for low hedging, particularly the delineation of the sections in formal knot gardens.

Box woods once flourished throughout Europe, western Asia and North Africa. The tree can live for over 600 years but, because the pale yellowish to bright orange wood is twice as hard as oak (*Quercus*), is as durable as brass, and is heavier than water, the great demand for it led to widespread felling. The word *buxus* also means 'flute' and the wood was popular in ancient cultures for making wind instruments. Before supplies of box were less plentiful and manmade fibres had superseded this wood, it was prized for making mathematical instruments (as it will not warp), it was sought after by artists for printing blocks for wood engraving plates (still considered desirable today by many), and it was one of the woods used for decoration in British railway passenger coaches. It was also carved into chessmen and was used to make combs, weavers' shuttles, nutcrackers and rolling pins.

The Venerable Bede (c.673-735) the renowned Anglo-Saxon scholar, theologian and historian, suggested that the cross on which Christ was crucified had been made of four types of wood namely box, cedar (*Cedrus*), cypress (*Cupressus*) and pine (*Pinus*). These woods were said to represent the four quarters of the world.

Over the centuries other uses to which it has been put and which are no longer seen today include the use of the volatile oils extracted from the wood in treatments for epilepsy, leprosy, piles and toothache, as well as its use as a sedative and a treatment for syphilis. Bark extracts have provided ingredients in perfume. A mixture of the leaves and sawdust has offered an auburn hair dye and not least the leaves have been used as a substitute for hops (*Humulus lupulus*). It was also a significant ingredient in a cure for rabies, and in France boxwood leaves have been considered the most desirable vegetable manure for grape vines (*Vitis vinifera*).

Today it is still sought after for musical instrument manufacture, particularly recorders and xylophones. This wood is also used commercially by cabinetmakers and wood engravers, and is made into turned boxes and chess pieces.

The oil is used in dentistry and in homoeopathic treatments.

It is the birthday flower for 17th September.