

*Calluna vulgaris*

[Synonyms : *Erica vulgaris*]

**HEATHER** is an evergreen shrub. Native to Asia Minor and Europe, it has small, light violet or pink flowers.

It is also known as Basam, Bassam, Bazzom, Beesom, *Beitillyng* (Icelandic), *Bérouelle* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Besen-Heide* (German), Bissom, Black ling, *Brande* (French), *Brendolo* (Italian), *Breyo* (Spanish), Broom, *Bruëthe* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Bruyère* (French), Common heather, Dog heather, Everlasting flower, *Funda* (Turkish), Grig, Griglum, *Grug Cyffredin* (Welsh), *Grug y Mêl* (Welsh), Hadder, Heath, Hedder, He-heather, *Heide* (German), *Heidekraut* (German), *Kanerva* (Finnish), Ling, Ling-heather, *Ljung* (Swedish), Moor-besom, Mountain mist, Red ling, *Rösslyng* (Norwegian), *Scopa carnicina* (Italian), *Scoppicio* (Italian), Scotch heather, Scots heather, Scottish heather, *Sorcelli* (Italian), *Struikheide* (Dutch), *Supurge otu* (Turkish), *Vřes obecný* (Czech), *Vřes obyčejný* (Slovak), *Weresk* (Russian), and White heather; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of passion (red), ‘protection against acts of passion’ (white), and solitude.

The flowers’ nectar is enjoyed by bees.

Warning – prolonged internal use can cause constipation.

*Vulgaris* means ‘common’.

Although some authorities have claimed that the name Heather was derived from the word ‘heathen’ because of the bloody colour of the flowers, others of significant standing contend the reverse ie. that the word ‘heathen’ arose because those who lived on the heath (stretches of moorland covered in heather) were more often than not divorced from civilised communities and the Christian religion.

Heather is sacred to Erycina (Venus) the Sicilian goddess of love.

Country lore in Britain held that rain followed when heather was burnt. Even today many believe that white heather bestows good fortune on both giver and receiver, while heather which is not white and is brought inside the house has denoted death. The former reputation has long been held in Scotland where in some areas it was the custom to give it to a stranger as a symbol of hospitality, and it is believed that this tradition was spread south of the border to England by Queen Victoria (1819-1901) from her visits to Balmoral Castle. In April 1882 her youngest son, Prince Leopold, Duke of Albany (1853-1884) was married at Windsor and all the bridesmaids’ headdresses contained white heather. His younger sister, Princess Beatrice (1857-1944) followed suit in 1885 when the ceremony took place on the Isle of Wight. On this occasion a party of Scots arrived at the celebrations with a bouquet from Balmoral in which white heather was ensconced. It is hardly surprising that the white flower became an important commercial asset for weddings and other significant occasions.

Although born in London, Queen Elizabeth, the late Queen Mother (1900-2002) enjoyed most of her childhood at Glamis Castle in Scotland. When she planted some apple trees (*Malus*) early on in her life, she followed a traditional highland custom and surrounded them with white heather. Apparently it was believed that this would make the trees exceptionally fruitful.

In the Highlands of Scotland, where it is still a familiar sight today, crofters' cottages or 'shielings' used to be thatched with heather and, when combined with earth and straw, the plant was also used to make the walls. The heather provided fuel, and the crofters made a tea (and a beer) from the leaves and stems. In the past heather has also been an ingredient in winemaking. The stems have been used to make brooms both for sweeping and for beating out moor-land fires, they have been fashioned into baskets, and they have also provided filling material for mattresses. In fact heather was such an important part of Highland life, that it is no less surprising than the commercial exploitation of the plant following its role in royal weddings, that those Highlanders who immigrated to North America in the very early days took heather with them, thus introducing it to that Continent.

Heather is an emblem of the Scottish MacAllister clan.

The flowers are most attractive to bees and are an important source of commercial honey, which itself is an ingredient in the familiar Scottish liqueur, drambuie. [Although heather honey is held in high regard in some regions today, it has never achieved universal approbation. Apparently this is due not least to the fact that the amount of nectar can vary dramatically according to soil and/or weather variations – so much so that on the European Continent thunder alone is believed to be able to slow the production of the nectar.]

Heather as young growth (secured when areas of heather moor-land are burnt annually) also provides fodder for sheep and deer, as well as food for grouse. Mutton from the Welsh mountains was once particularly noted for the flavour given by the heather on which the sheep had grazed.

The bark has been used for tanning, and it also yields a yellow wool dye. The fresh leaves, and the flowers, have been used as a source of brilliant orange and yellow dyes which were particularly associated in days gone by with the Hebridean islands off the Scottish coast. Today suitable roots are chosen on a commercial scale for making briar pipes. Heather is used as an alternative to hops (*Humulus lupulus*) in brewing beer, and is an important commercial source of honey.

Medicinally, herbalists have recommended the dried flowers or leaves for the treatment of diarrhoea, bladder disorders, insomnia, fluid retention and rheumatism. Today it is used in homoeopathy.