

Cytisus scoparius

[Synonyms : *Genista scoparia*, *Sarothamnus bourgaei*, *Sarothamnus oxyphyllus*, *Sarothamnus scoparius*, *Sarothamnus vulgaris*, *Spartium scoparium*]

BROOM is a deciduous shrub. Native to central and southern Europe it has small fragrant, pea-like yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Banadlen* (Welsh), Banathal, *Banhadlen* (Welsh), *Banhallen* (Welsh), Bannal, Bannel, Basam, Basom, Beesom, Besam, *Besenginster* (German), *Besenkleestrauch* (German), Besom, Bisom, Bissom, Bizzom, Breeam, *Brem* (Dutch), *Bringe* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), Broom flowers, Broom tops, Browme, Brum, Brushes, Cat's peas, Common broom, *Cytise* (French), European broom, *Genêt* (French), *Genêt à balais* (French), *Genista*, *Giesta* (Portuguese), *Giesteira das vassouras* (Portuguese), *Ginestra scopa* (Italian), *Ginster* (German), Golden chain, Golden chair, Green basom, Green broom, Green wood, *Gyvel* (Danish), Hagweed, *Hårginst* (Swedish), *Harris* (Swedish), Hayweed, *Hiniesta* (Spanish), Indian sage, Irish broom, Irish tops, *Jänönvihma* (Finnish), *Janovec metlatý* (Czech), *Janovec obecny* (Czech), Lady's slipper, Link, *Prútnatec metlovitý* (Slovak), *Schottischer Ginster* (German), *Scobe* (Irish Gaelic), Scoparium, Scorpion plant, Scotch bloom, Scotch broom, Scots broom, Scottish broom, and Yellow broom; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of humility, neatness, and servility.

The fruit pods burst loudly when ripe to scatter 12-18 seeds. The flowers also explode when visited by an insect in order to release their pollen.

Warning – the plant is poisonous (especially the seeds), and large doses can affect the nervous system. They can cause dizziness, rapid heartbeat, headache, diarrhoea, nausea, circulatory collapse and death. It must only be taken internally under a qualified practitioner's supervision. It must not be taken internally during pregnancy or if suffering from high blood pressure. It can be poisonous for some animals.

Scoparius is derived from Latin *scoparum* (besom, broom) meaning broom-like.

Its common name Broom probably arises out of its use in the past to make brooms and also its old English name *brom*. (Gypsies were still cutting the plant to make brooms and besoms well into the 20th Century and these were used particularly for sweeping out the brick bread ovens.) Both the classicists and the old herbals refer to broom as *Genista* and there seems to be some doubt as to which species of broom was actually meant by this. It is possible that it could have been Spanish broom (*Spartium junceum*).

Broom is actually believed to have been an emblem associated with the French Anjou family from the time of Fulk the Black (c.970-1040) and it was his great-grandson, Geoffrey the Handsome (1113-1151), Count of Anjou, who married the then widowed Matilda (grand-daughter of the Norman William the Conqueror and daughter of Henry I of England). According to records unusually for a time when surname's were not common – particularly in royal families – Geoffrey adopted the name Plantagenet (a medieval name for broom was *planta genista*). His son Henry (1133-1189), who was destined to succeed Stephen on the English throne (as Henry II), ultimately established the Plantagenet dynasty for which broom, as a spray in fruit (pod) not in blossom, was depicted in the heraldic device. Legend tells how Henry's father, Geoffrey, broke off a flowering sprig

from a shrub clinging firmly to a rocky but crumbling surface and put it in his cap with the words

Thus shall that golden plant ever be my cognizance, rooted firmly amid rocks, and yet upholding that which is ready to fall. I will bear it in my crest, amid battlefield, if need be, at tournaments and when dispensing justice.

The dictum was upheld by Henry's descendants until the 15th Century and the reign of Richard III. Richard I (1157-1199), also known as the Lion Heart, who succeeded Henry II, had broom depicted on his Great Seal. In 1234, by which time Henry III (1207-1272) was ruling England, St. Louis of France (1215-1270), who succeeded his father to the French throne when he was only eleven, established a special order which was bestowed by French monarchs and came to be highly respected, *L'Ordre de Genest*. The collar of the order depicted alternately the French fleur-de-lys and the broom flower. The English, Richard II (1367-1400) who reigned from 1377-1399, received this honour and his tomb in Westminster Abbey is decorated with a broom plant bearing open, empty pods. (A word of caution is however appropriate here. Even though popular belief supports broom as the star of the foregoing legends and heraldic associations there are those that believe the plant in question was petty whin, *Genista anglica*. Additionally the name 'Plantagenet', popularly related to kings of England from Henry II, was only mentioned in Parliamentary rolls for the first time in 1460 and strictly should only be applied to Edward IV, Edward V and Richard III.) Broom is also the insignia of the Scottish Forbes clan.

Religious connections include a Christian legend according to which the Virgin Mary berated the broom near the hiding place where she guarded her Son, for fear that the popping sound made by its bursting ripe seed pods would draw attention to her presence as Herod's soldiers sought out first-born baby boys – and at Whitsun, in the Christian calendar, churches were decorated with these blooms. The flowers also featured in decorations generally during the Whitsun festival.

In England the flowering broom signified good luck and a life of plenty at country weddings where the branches were carried tied with ribbons. And with other plants it could also be strewn in the bride's path. On the European mainland a branch of flowering broom was used at gypsy weddings for 'leaping the broomstick'. The basis for this ritual depended upon whether the bridegroom's trousers or the bride's skirts touched the broom. The latter was said to foretell his subsequent unfaithfulness, and the former was supposed to indicate that the new bride had already lost her virginity or would be pregnant by the end of the day.

In contrast another superstition bestowed broom with magical properties for the whole year with the exception of the month of May (the Roman month of death). During May the phallic benefits with which it was said to be blessed would turn into ill luck for anyone who collected the plant during that period. It was also said to be unlucky to use broom in full flower for sweeping inside the house as the head of the household, himself, might be swept away, and if a young child was chastised with broom this could stunt the youngster's growth.

Broom, as a growing plant, has been put to many uses. As its roots help to bind the soil and prevent erosion it has been planted on steep banks. It has also been used as shelter for game and as a windbreak, particularly for more tender shrubs. And tender mortals too (both lovers and lovelorn), according to many a Scottish romantic songwriter or poet, were attracted to the seclusion offered by broom groves.

Apart from its obvious use in brooms and brushes, the plant has also been used for basketmaking on the island of Madeira. In England it has been used for thatching, fencing

and screening. The bark yields a fibre that has been used in paper and cloth manufacture. It has also been employed in tanning. Broom was used as fuel too and in Scotland whole fields of it were once cultivated for this purpose.

Broom has been used to make wine. Even recent recipe books have shown it as one of the ingredients, and in France the buds were once pickled like capers. The seeds have been collected to make a substitute coffee.

Medicinally, broom was believed to be a cure for kidney and bladder complaints in Anglo-Saxon times. It was also one of the major medicinal plants in all the European schools of medicine. The English King Henry VIII (1491-1547) is said to have drunk its flower water and the flowers have been employed as a treatment for gout. Herbalists recommended juice extracted from young branches or twigs as a remedy for fever, jaundice, fluid retention, rheumatism and pain. Broom, although poisonous in large doses, is still used today (sometimes as an antidote for some poisons, including snake bites). But it is now considered to be unsuitable for domestic use. A drug extracted from the broom tops can be an ingredient in some remedies for various kidney and liver ailments – which confirms the original Anglo-Saxon uses.