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Erica arborea

TREE HEATH is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native from the Mediterranean to tropical Africa, it has very small, slightly honey-scented, ash-white or pinkish flowers.

It is also known as *Asta* (Ethiopian), *Baumheide* (German), *Betouro* (Portuguese), *Brezo* (Canary Island), Briar, Briar root, Briarwood, *Bruyère arborescente* (French), *Bruyère en arbre* (French), Giant heath, *Muthithinda* (Kikuyu), *Riki* (Greek), *Torga* (Portuguese), *Trädjung* (Swedish), *Trælyng* (Danish), Tree heather, *Urce* (Spanish), *Urze abrórea* (Portuguese), *Urze-branca* (Portuguese), *Urze molar* (Portuguese), *Vřesovec stromovitý* (Czech), and White heather.

Arborea is derived from Latin *arbor* (tree) meaning ‘tree-like or tending to be woody’.

The name Briarwood comes from a French word *bruyère* meaning ‘heather or heathland’.

It is from the roots of this shrub/tree (not the sweet-briar rose, *Rosa eglanteria* – or any other wild rose) that Italy, southern France and North Africa particularly manufacture the familiarly named Briarwood bowls of tobacco pipes. [Another closely related species can also be used for these pipes.] The importance of this industry to those very poor Mediterranean areas where it was practised is well illustrated by the fact that in Italy the government paid a fixed rate of compensation to employees maimed while sawing the green root – and it was not unknown for the tip of a finger to be cut off purposely in order to obtain this largesse. The dried branches have been used as brooms.

Several tales have grown up describing how tree heath came to be chosen. Saint-Claude in eastern France, prior to its fame as a centre for pipe manufacture, had built a name for carving boxwood rosaries, beads and snuffboxes. Peasants in the Pyrenees collected the wood and it is said that they started to supplement their bags of it with the roots as well. Initially the craftsmen made these roots into highly polished beads until a brainwave led them to making pipes and establishing the subsequent industry. Another story suggests that a Frenchman who manufactured tobacco pipes was holidaying on Corsica and found he had mislaid his favourite meershaum pipe. He persuaded a local woodcarver to fashion one for him and this was made out of tree heath roots. It was so successful that the Frenchman returned home with a supply of the roots and began manufacturing the bowls for the now much-loved briar pipes.

The stems have been used to make charcoal.

Until quite recently a species of silkworm was fed on tree heath. Authorities note however that tree heath is still an important honey plant.