

Juncus effusus

[Synonyms : *Juncus bogotensis*, *Juncus communis*, *Juncus communis* var. *effusus*, *Juncus conglomeratus*, *Juncus effusus* var. *gracilis*, *Juncus effusus* var. *solutus*, *Juncus mauritanus*]

SOFT RUSH is an aquatic perennial. Native to Asia, Australia, Europe, New Zealand and North America, it has brownish-green flower heads.

It is also known as Bog rush, *Brwynen Babwyr* (Welsh), Candle rush, Common rush, *Flatter-Binse* (German), *Jonc* (Channel Islander-Guernsey and Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Jonc épars* (French), *Junco marino* (Spanish), Lamp rush, Matting rush, *Pabwyren* (Welsh), Sea rush, *Simar* (Maltese), Rush, *Sítina rozkladitá* (Czech), *Sitina rozložitá* (Slovak), *Sitnik raschod' aščijsja* (Russian), *Sit rozpierzchly* (Polish), Sugar grass, and *Veketåg* (Swedish); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of docility.

It is pollinated by the wind.

Warning – soft rush is a potentially poisonous plant for some animals.

Effusus means ‘loosely spreading or straggling’ with reference to the leaves.

In past centuries in Britain rushes were harvested and prepared by women and children who had to wade up to their waists in water to do this. These would be sold at Rush Fairs.

The pith was used for candlewicks while the green leaves (right up to the 17th Century) would either be strewn, or plaited into chair seats and matting. In wealthier homes fresh rushes were strewn daily or weekly while they were in season. Certain kinds of rushes were used to make whips, thongs and even wedding rings. Although the latter were eventually to be undervalued (because of their use in mock marriage ceremonies) in 1217 the then Bishop of Salisbury was compelled to issue an order against their future use. Despite this decree however it is believed likely that the practice continued for another 300 years. Certainly the famous English poet, Edmund Spenser (c.1552-1599), was able to write in *November* of his *The Shepheardes Calender*

O thou great shepheard, Lobbin, how great is thy grieve!
Where bene the nosegayes that she dight for thee?
The coloured chaplets wrought with a chiefe,
The knotted rush-ringes and gilt rosemarie.

and his peer, Francis Quarles (1592-1644) also wrote

..... Love-sick swains
Compose rush-rings, and myrtle-berry chains,
And stuck with glorious king-cups in their bonnets,
Adorned with laurel-slip, chant true love sonnets.

The importance of the soft rush in everyday living during those centuries is even more apparent when it is remembered that they justified gatherings such as the Rush Bearings – most of which some authorities have suggested were probably an excuse for a drunken orgy.

The soft rush is referred to in many of the plays of the well-known dramatist, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), including a couple in *The Taming of the Shrew* – a play in which Grumio, one of Petruchio’s servants, cries

.....Where’s the cook? is supper ready, the house trimmed,
rushes strewed, cobwebs swept;

and the other when Katherine herself says meekly

.....since we have come so far.
And be it moon, or sun, or what you please.
An if you please to call it a rush-candle,
Henceforth, I vow, it shall be so for me.

Today the soft rush can still be used for weaving matting and chair seats, particularly in Japan. Some North American Indian tribes, including the Hesquiat, Snuqualmie, Mendocino Indian and Cherokee used the fibre for making string or cord. The Chippewa tribe wove soft rush into mats and matting, and the Tolowa, Yurok, Karok and Mendocino Indian tribes all gathered it for basketry.

Few tribes seem to have found the plant of any culinary use but the Snuqualmie did eat the young sprouts raw in Spring.

There were one or two tribes who fed their animals on the plant. It provided fodder for Okanagan-Colville horses and an early Spring forage for Mendocino Indian cows and horses.

In North America the soft rush's rootstalks are enjoyed by muskrats.
It is the birthday flower for 2nd April.