

*Ligustrum vulgare*

**WILD PRIVET** is a semi-evergreen shrub or tree. Native to northern Africa, western Asia and Europe (including southern Britain), it has small, white flowers with a strong sweet, unpleasant smell.

It is also known as *Alheña* (Spanish), Black tops, Blue poison, Common European privet, Common privet, Dog drake, European privet, *Gemeiner Liguster* (German), *Gewöhnlicher Liguster* (German), Golden privet, *Liguster* (Dutch, German, Swedish), *Ligustro ordinara* (Esperanto), Pevit, Pivot, Prim, Primprint, Primwort, Privet, *Privette* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), Privy, *Ptačí zob obecný* (Czech), Skedge, Skedgewith, Skerrish, Skidgey, *Troène* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), White pipe privet, *Yswydden* (Welsh), and *Zob vtáčí* (Slovak); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of defence, and prohibition.

The flowers are attractive to long tongued honeybees.

Warning – the berries (and possibly the leaves) are poisonous particularly for children. They can cause nausea, intestinal inflammation, dehydration, vomiting, diarrhoea and death. Contact can cause dermatitis. The plant is poisonous for some browsing animals but not for goats.

*Vulgare* means ‘common’.

Used in Britain for centuries as hedging wild privet has also been subjected to the topiarist’s attentions. In writings of the English, barber-surgeon and herbalist (the latter as a charlatan for many authorities), John Gerard (1545-1612) published 37 years after his death, he noted that during his lifetime this shrub was one of the gardener’s favourites for shaping into many different forms.

Honey produced by bees that have been drawn to wild privet flowers has a fishy taste, but authorities note that this taste is not translated into scent when the flowers are used to make toilet water.

The tiny glossy blue-black berries are an especial delicacy for some birds, particularly the bullfinch. The great enthusiasm for the fruit is well illustrated by their use as a lure in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Twigs on branches loaded with fruit were smeared with bird-lime by the bird-catchers.

Apart from the dyes that can be obtained from the leaves and berries and may still be prepared today in the home, glove-makers once used the berries for a black dye for kid.

Today this hard wood is used for making small tools and it also provides a source of charcoal). The twigs are used for basketry.

Medicinally, herbalists used the flowers for treating stomach-aches, period problems, headaches and inflamed wounds and also recommended it as a gargle for oral sores.