

Myrica gale

[Synonyms : *Gale belgica*, *Gale commune*, *Gale palustris*, *Gale palustris* var. *crenata*, *Gale palustris* var. *denticulata*, *Gale palustris* var. *lusitanica*, *Gale palustris* var. *subglabra*, *Gale palustris* var. *tomentosa*, *Gale portugalensis*, *Gale uliginosa*, *Myrica gale* var. *gale*, *Myrica gale* var. *subarctica*, *Myrica gale* var. *subglabra*, *Myrica gale* var. *tomentosa*, *Myrica palustris*]

BOG MYRTLE is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to Asia (particularly north-eastern Siberia), north-western Europe and to North America (as far south as Virginia), it has golden brown catkins.

It is also known as Bayberry, Bay myrtle, Candle berries, Candleberry myrtle, Devonshire myrtle, Dutch myrtle, English bog myrtle, Fern gale, Flea wood, *Gagelstrauch* (German), *Gale*, *Galé odorant* (French), *Gemeine Wachsstrauch* (German), Golden osier, Golden withy, *Gwyrddling* (Welsh), *Helygen Mair* (Welsh), Meadow fern, *Mirto holandés* (Spanish), Moor myrtle, *Mose-Pors* (Danish), Moss wythan, *Myrica gale* (Italian), Myrtle, Pimento royal, *Pors* (Swedish), Scotch gale, *Suomyrtti* (Finnish), Sweet, Sweet gale, Sweet willow, Sweet withy, *Vřesna bahenní* (Czech), *Vřesna močiarna* (Slovak), and Withy wind.

The plant has the ability to change sex from year to year.

Gale was an old English common name for this species.

The name Flea wood which is rarely used today came about from the past use of the aromatic dried leaves in mattresses, linen drawers or cupboards as an insect repellent and killer (particularly for fleas) – which also had the advantage of scenting the linen.

In Sweden they used a bark decoction as an insecticide.

The catkins yield a poor quality tallow if they are boiled in water and this was once used for making candles and sealing wax. Bark was used to tan calf skins. For people in several countries bog myrtle also yielded a yellow dye.

Despite the fact that this was one of the most useful plants it still attracted some negative superstition and in Britain at least it was believed to be unlucky to use it as a cattle switch. This may well have been connected with a belief especially prevalent in Ireland that in Christian lore Pontius Pilate used bog myrtle to scourge Jesus before the Crucifixion.

Bog myrtle is the emblem of the Scottish Campbell clan.

Originally bog myrtle was one of the main plants used for flavouring beer (Gale beer) in northern Europe and was widely harvested and protected by law. In some areas you could be fined for gathering bog myrtle on somebody else's land. Gale beer was particularly noted for being able to allay thirst and the plant was also said to be able to improve beer's foaming qualities. In some countries (including northern England, and France and Sweden) the dried fruit have been added to broth and have also been used as a spice. While in China (as also in Wales) the leaves have been infused to make a tea. But in North America the Potawatomi tribe viewed the plant as a preservative with which they lined pails of harvested fruit.

North American Indian tribes found other uses for the plant as well. The Potawatomi, identified insecticidal qualities and threw the plant on their fires to raise a barrier of mosquito

repellent. Some of the catkins formed part of the lure used by fishermen in part of the Cree tribe – and some of the Chippewa boiled the seeds for a yellow dye and obtained a brown one from its branch tips.

Authorities have noted how the plant was also a source of medicine for the North American Bella Coola. It was used not only to treat fluid retention but also some venerea disease. Today the wax is used in the manufacture of aromatic candles.

Medicinally, bog myrtle used to be part of a treatment for scabies, dysentery and skin diseases generally.