

Ruscus aculeatus

BUTCHER'S-BROOM is an evergreen shrub. Native from the Azores to Iran (including north-western Europe and the Mediterranean) it has greenish-white or pinkish flowers. It is also known as *Aghriomersini* (Greek), Box holly, *Brusco* (Italian), *Bruscus*, *Buis pointu* (French), *Celynnen Fair* (Welsh), *Echter Mäuserdorn* (German), *Fragon piquant* (French), *Frêgon* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), Jew's myrtle, Kneeholly, Kneeholm, Knee-holme, Kneeholy, Knee hull, Kneehulver, *Lagomili* (Greek), *Listnatec pichlavý* (Czech), *Mäusedorn* (German), *Petit-houx* (French), Pettigree, Prickly pettigree, Prickly pettigree, *Prunet* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Rusco* (Spanish), *Rusco pungente* (Italian), *Ruscus*, Shepherd's myrtle, Sweet broom, and *Yaban mersini* (Turkish).

Warning – butcher's-broom must not be taken internally if suffering from high blood pressure. Trade demands for butcher's broom in Europe are such that it has been the subject of over harvesting and at the end of the 1990s its future survival was considered to be threatened. It is certainly a protected species in Britain.

Aculeatus is derived from Latin *aculeus* (point, sting) meaning 'prickly' with reference to the plant bearing spines or spine-tipped leaves.

Both the ancient Greeks and the Romans (as well as later Europeans) ate the crisp young shoots when prepared like garden asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*).

The roots are one of the ingredients (with those of garden asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*), garden parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* var. *dulce*) and celery (*Apium graveolens* var. *dulce*)) in a celebrated liqueur called Five Roots Liqueur.

For about 300 years from the 16th Century butcher's-broom was associated with the meat industry in Western Europe. Its prickly holly-like branches (*Ilex*) were once used to act as a barrier to keep animals (vermin particularly) at bay. Then as time passed according to some authorities they were used as brooms or scrubbers to clean chopping blocks (and in the home, kitchen utensils as well). In due course their festive holly-like appearance became a traditional decoration for meat displays in butchers' shops. (At the same time they were also used as decoration during Christmas festivities in both church and home.)

Some heraldic devices incorporate this species: For example it appears in the badge of the Earls of Sutherland.

Gypsies used to sell bunches of the dead shoots with wax flowers. Today however butcher's-broom is most often seen in fresh or dried floral decorations.

Medicinally, herbalists used to recommend use of the roots for treating kidney stones, fluid retention and healing broken bones, as well as for gout, jaundice and piles. Today however it is rarely used for any medicinal purposes.