

*Ulex europaeus*

[Synonyms : *Ulex hibernicus*, *Ulex strictus*]

**GORSE** is a spiny evergreen shrub. Native to Atlantic Europe (including Britain) it has small pea-like, strongly buttery-smelling, golden yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Agone* (French), *Ajonc* (French), *Ajonc d'Europe* (French), *Ärttörne* (Swedish), *Broom*, *Carqueja* (Portuguese), *Common gorse*, *Echte Heckensame* (German), *Eithinen Ffrenigig* (Welsh), *Europäische Stechgenister* (German), *Fingers and thumbs*, *Fray*, *French-fuzz*, *Frey*, *Furra*, *Furze*, *Gaspeldoorn* (Dutch), *Genêt épineux* (French), *Geon* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Ginestra* (Italian), *Ginestrone* (Italian), *Golden gorse*, *Goss*, *Gowst*, *Hawth*, *Heckensame* (German), *Heybrem* (Dutch), *Hiniesta espinosa* (Spanish), *Hlodáš evropský* (Czech), *Honeybottle*, *Hoth*, *Irish gorse*, *Jan* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Jonc marin* (French), *Joue marin* (French), *Landier* (French), *Ling*, *Moor whin*, *Pins and needles*, *Prickly broom*, *Ruffet*, *Stechginster* (German), *Thorn broom*, *Thumbs and fingers*, *Tojo* (Portuguese), *Tornblad* (Danish), and *Whin*; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of anger, enduring affection, and 'love for all seasons'.

The small black fruit pods explode in hot weather scattering the seeds.

Warning – the seeds are poisonous.

*Europaeus* means 'of or from Europe'.

The name Gorse is derived from an Anglo Saxon word *gorst* meaning a 'waste' (referring to the plant's common and moor-land habitat) while *Furze* is a corruption of its Anglo Saxon name *fyr*.

For the Druids in England gorse has long symbolized the young sun and gorse fires used to be lit on the hills at the Spring Equinox. An English Midsummer custom involved carrying burning gorse brands around the herds of cattle in order to ensure their good health for the following year. Another practice that would be looked upon with horror today and took place in the county of Suffolk commemorated St. Stephen's Day or Wrenning Day (26<sup>th</sup> December). In memory of St. Stephen's martyrdom a wren was stoned to death and boys carried the dead bird round on a gorse bush begging for money.

In some parts of England gorse was particularly welcome. It was said to attract the first bees of the year which endowed it with strong powers and it was included in bridal bouquets thus reflecting the old English saying

When gorse is out of bloom

Kissing's out of season.

which was no doubt the explanation for a traditional Cornish custom still practised in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Early on May Morning a branch of flowering gorse was quietly hung over the farmhouse door. Not only did the perpetrator look forward to a breakfast of bread and cream with a bowl of rich milk but if it had been placed before the farmer arose from his bed he, the farmer, would be 'in forfeit to the maids'. Gorse was also trusted as a protection against witches. While in Ireland not only would it sometimes be included in May Day garlands hung over doorways but it was also said that if a sprig was worn you would never stumble. In contrast in Scotland gorse had, and may still have for some, an especial meaning. An old Scottish saying foretells Edinburgh's downfall if the gorse is

without flowers. While in southern England (in Dorset and Somerset) it was unlucky to bring gorse inside – if gorse crossed the threshold a coffin was sure to proceed in the opposite direction.

Archaeologists have found remains on Neolithic sites which show the use of gorse as fuel and charcoal – from which it is surmised that they must once have been in areas of forest from which the fuel and charcoal must have come. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in some areas of southern England the gorse was cut and bundled as fuel for bakers' ovens (particularly in Surrey). In parts of England too the bushes were milled to crush the thorns and then fed to cattle, sheep and horses. Ashes from burnt gorse were used to make soap and were also scattered as a manure.

In the past the shrub has been cultivated between lines of peas (*Pisum sativum*) to protect the crop from mice and birds. It has also been grown in sandy areas in some countries to help bind the soil together.

The flowers are the source of a yellow dye which was once used to colour Easter Eggs.

Leaf buds have been infused to make a tea, and the flowers have provided an ingredient for homemade wine (even today).

Some people used to believe that gorse had insecticidal properties to which fleas were especially vulnerable.

Strangely although in its native Britain gorse has been taken for granted (or considered a fire hazard) it seems that it has attracted extravagant eulogies from visitors to that Country in the past (not least celebrated botanists) and has been cultivated in gardens on the European Continent as an ornamental plant.

Medicinally, European herbalists used gorse to treat jaundice and kidney complaints. The flowers were given in infusion to children for curing scarlet fever.

It is the birthday flower for 28<sup>th</sup> November.