

Common Gorse *Ulex europaeus*

What's in a name?

Gorse is also known as 'furze' or 'whin' in the UK. The word furze is derived from the Anglo-Saxon name 'fyrz', and gorse from the Anglo-Saxon 'gorst', which means 'a waste'. This is a reference to the large open moorlands where the plant is often found.

Botany & Ecology

Gorse is a type of flowering plant within the pea family, and has around 20 different species. Common gorse is however, the only native species.



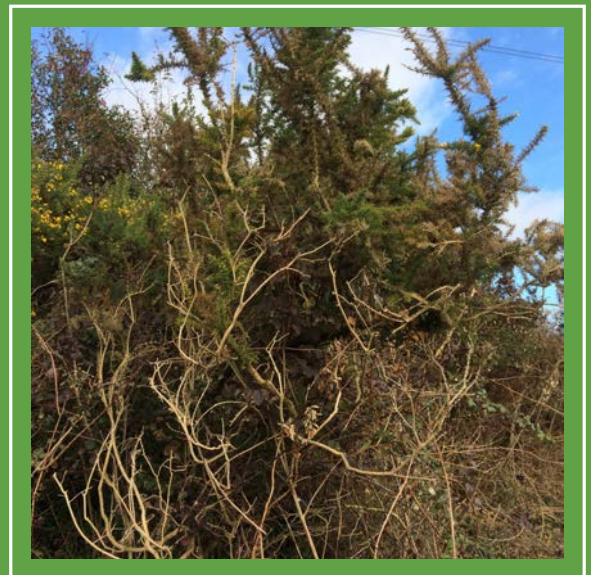
Gorse thrives in exposed sunny conditions but can tolerate dry, well drained conditions, typical of some of our moorlands. Common gorse is the largest species and can reach 3m (10 ft) in height. These tall examples are leggy and typical of plants fighting for light on the edge of a woodland.

All gorse species have yellow flowers and the common gorse can be seen to flower through much of the year; more so now as our climate begins to become warmer. The flower gives off a coconut smell which is particularly pungent when the sun is bright and hot. However, like poppies, the flower has little or no nectar but is very rich in pollen (see also below).

Gorse is well adapted to the fires that sometimes sweep through the moorlands and so will regrow quickly from the old stumps. The new shoots are bright green and much softer than the hard, spiky thorns of the mature plant. The seed pods also like the heat and can be heard popping in the hot summer sun. The seeds generally fall to the ground under the parent plant but in some circumstance, the seeds will be distributed by ants.

Common gorse is often initially planted on land reclamation sites. The strong nitrogen-fixing capacity helps other plants establish.

Gorse is a valuable plant for wildlife. The thick thorny cover is ideal for protecting bird nests, particularly birds like Dartford warblers (*Sylvia undata*) and European stonechats (*Saxicola rubicola*). The common name of the whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra*) confirms its close association with one of the alternative names for gorse (see above).



The flowers are sometimes eaten by the caterpillars of the double-striped pug moth (*Gymnoscelis rufifasciata*), while those of the case-bearer moth *Coleophora albicosta* feed exclusively on gorse. The dry dead wood stems provides food for the caterpillars of the concealer moth (*Batia lambdaella*). The pollen rich flowers attract a variety of bees.

Please note, readers should take advice from a qualified doctor or herbalist before using plants as a cure for ailments.

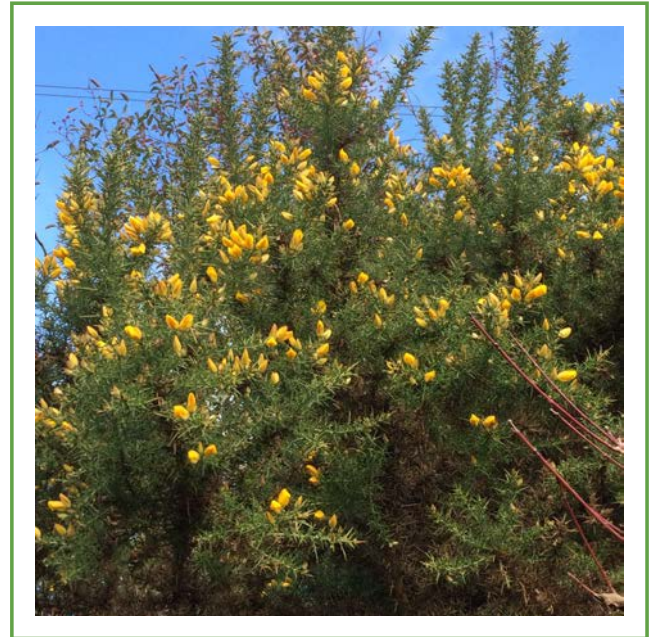
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Folklore

"When gorse is out of blossom, kissing's out of fashion" is a phrase used all over the UK in some form or another. In rural Hampshire (during the 1950's), school children were told not to pick the gorse flowers as they were home to evil dragons. Contrary to this, there was a tradition among agricultural communities to cut and hang gorse in the home as it was believed to protect against witches.

However, in Devon it was considered unlucky to have Gorse indoors during May as it might bring about the death of a family member. It was also common to substitute gorse for mistletoe and kissing under a gorse bush at Christmas was common right up until the 1950's.

The long flowering season of the plant was associated with good fertility and this characteristic was reflected in the tradition of adding a sprig of gorse to a bride's bouquet. This aspect of fertility was also reflected in the ancient Celtic practice of making and lighting a torch from dead Gorse and taking it through the cattle sheds as it was believed to protect against infertility in the herd.



Folk Medicine

Culpepper, an early physician, prescribed gorse as a 'cure to clear the liver and spleen of obstructions'. Research in the nineteenth century identified that the high alkaline content of the plant had a laxative effect, proving that Culpepper was on the right track.

An infusion of the blooms, as a drink, was also given to children suffering from scarlet fever. A tea made from the flowers was also suggested to relieve jaundice and as a diuretic. In Suffolk it was used to stimulate menstruation.

In homeopathy, gorse is still offered to those who are suffering with depression. It is believed to help people get in touch with their inner spiritual self, whilst releasing courage and the determination to move forward.



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