

Butcher's Broom (*Ruscus aculeatis*)

Description: This herb's berries, leaves and root are all used medicinally.

Properties: This herb is known for being a cleansing herb. It can be used to help expel urine, lower cholesterol level, and increase circulation.

Uses: Use butcher's broom to decrease swelling in the ankles, as well as help with carpal tunnel syndrome, lymphedema, syphilis, and varicose veins.

Doses: This herb can be found in tablet form, powder form, creams, and extract form.

Warnings: Taking too much butcher's broom can cause side effects like a weakened heart, vomiting, purging, low blood pressure and decreased nerve strength. Use this herb only with medical supervision.

Also known as

Ruscus aculeatus, Box Holly, Jew's Myrtle, Kneeholm, Knee Holly, Pettigree, Sweet Broom, *Rusci Aculeati*, *Rusci Aculeati Rhizoma*.

Introduction

Butcher's Broom is a low, shrubby, evergreen plant of the lily family. It is native to the Mediterranean, Southern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. At one time its stems were used to protect curing meats from rodents and to make brooms for butchers' stalls.

Historically, western herbalists used it to improve circulation, relieve constipation, and help with water retention. It has been used in Eastern medicine to treat urinary and reproductive disorders. Culpepper reported in the 17th century that a decoction of the root (taken orally) and a poultice of the berries (applied topically) helped in knitting fractured bones.

Constituents

Ascorbic acid, beta-carotene, calcium, chromium, chrysophanic acid, magnesium, manganese, niacin, riboflavin, ruscogenin, rutin, selenium, tin, zinc.

Parts Used

The washed and dried root, chopped.

Typical Preparations

Tea or extract. To make a tea from chopped root, place 1 teaspoon of the herb in a cup of boiling water and allow to steep in a closed teapot for 10 minutes. The teapot should not be heated. Strain before drinking.

Summary

A mild diuretic, butchers broom was approved by the authoritative German Commission E as a supportive therapy for chronic venous insufficiency, a condition causing pain, swelling, and fatigue in the calves. Chronic venous insufficiency is related to varicose veins. Pliny the Elder in 60 C.E. noted that it was a treatment for the swelling of veins. In modern Europe, components in butchers broom have been isolated and used in formulas for the treatment of varicose veins and hemorrhoids. The German Commission also recommended butchers broom for treatment of hemorrhoids. At least one clinical trial found that butchers broom may relieve lymph edema (arm swelling) following treatment for breast cancer.

Precautions

Maximum safe doses for young children, pregnant or nursing women, and persons with liver or kidney disease have not been established. Rare cases of gastric disorders and nausea have occurred.

Botanical: *Ruscus aculeatus* (LINN.)

Family: N.O. Liliaceae

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---**Synonyms**---Kneeholly. Knee Holly. Kneeholm. Jew's Myrtle. Sweet Broom. Pettigree.

---**Parts Used**---Herb and root.

---**Habitat**---Butcher's Broom, a low, shrubby, evergreen plant, which occurs not infrequently in woods and waste and bushy places, especially in the south of England, is sometimes called Knee Holly, though it is in no way allied to the true Holly, being a member of the Lily tribe. It is, however, entirely different in appearance to the bulbous plants we regard as the characteristic representatives of this group, it being, in fact, the only Liliaceous shrub known in this country, and the only representative of its genus among our flora, the other species of the genus, *Ruscus*, being mostly native to northern Africa.

---**Description**---The name Knee Holly appears to have been given it from its rising to about the height of a man's knee (though occasionally specimens are found growing about 3 feet high), and from its having, like the true Holly, prickly leaves, which are also evergreen.

There is no other British plant exhibiting any similarity to the Butcher's Broom. Its tough, green, erect, striated stems, which are destitute of bark, send out from the upper part many short branches, plentifully furnished with very rigid leaves, which are really a mere expansion of the stem, and terminate each in a single sharp spine. The small greenish-white flowers are solitary growing from the centre of the leaves and blossom in the early spring. They are dioecious, i.e. stamens and pistils are on different plants, as is also mostly the case with the Holly and Mistletoe. The corolla is deeply six-cleft, the stamens, in the one kind of flower, connected at the base, the style, in the fertile flowers, surrounded by a nectary. The fertile flowers are succeeded by scarlet berries as large as cherries, which are ripe in September, and remain attached to the plant all the winter and cause it often to be picked for room decoration.

Another member of the same family is *Ruscus racemosus* or *Alexandrinus*, a favourite evergreen shrub with the leaf-like branches *unarmed*, and the racemes of small flowers terminal. It is the original of the 'poets' laurel' so often seen in classic prints. It, too has red berries - smaller than those of the Butcher's Broom.

Other species are *R. androgynous*, a native of the Canaries, which bears its flowers along the edges of the so-called leaves; *R. Hypophyllum*, in which the flowers are borne on the underside of the flattened branches; and *R. Hypoglossum*, also from southern Europe, in which the flowers are on the upper side under a bract-like branchlet.

The young shoots of Butcher's Broom have often been eaten like those of the Asparagus, a plant to which it is closely allied. The matured branches used to be bound into bundles and sold to butchers for sweeping their blocks, hence the name: Butcher's Broom. It is frequently made into besoms in Italy. One of the names given the plant, 'Jew's Myrtle,' points to its use for service during the Feast of Tabernacles. 'Pettigree' is another old popular name, the meaning of which is not clear.

Parkinson tells us that Butcher's Broom was used to preserve 'hanged meate' from being eaten by mice, and also for the making of brooms, 'but the King's Chamber is by revolution of time turned to the Butcher's stall, for that a bundle of the stalkes tied together serveth them to cleanse their stalls and from thence have we our English name of Butcher's broom.'

Culpepper says it is

'a plant of Mars, being of a gallant cleansing and opening quality. The decoction of the root drank, and a poultice made of the berries and leaves applied, are effectual in knitting and consolidating broken bones or parts out of joint. The common way of using it is to boil the root of it, and Parsley and Fennel and Smallage in white wine, and drink the decoction, adding the like quantity of Grassroot to them: The more of the root you boil the stronger will the decoction be; it works no ill effects, yet I hope you have wit enough to give the strongest decoction to the strongest bodies.'

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---**Cultivation**---Butcher's Broom is very hardy, thriving in almost any soil or situation, and is often planted in shrubberies or edges of woods, on account of its remaining green after the deciduous trees have shed their leaves.

Propagation is generally effected by division of the roots in autumn. The shrub may also be propagated by seed, but quicker results are obtained by the other method. When planted under trees it soon spreads into large clumps.

---**Part Used**---The root or rhizome, collected in autumn. The root is thick, striking deep into the ground. When dry, it is brownish grey, 2 to 4 inches long and 1/3 inch in diameter, having somewhat crowded rings and rounded stem scars on the upper surface and many woody rootlets below. If a transverse section be made, a number of vascular bundles in the central portion are to be seen. The root has no odour, but its taste is sweetish at first and then slightly acid.

The whole herb is also collected, being dried in the same manner as Holly leaves.

---**Medicinal Action and Uses**---Diaphoretic, diuretic, deobstruent and aperient. Was much recommended by Dioscorides and other ancient physicians as an aperient and diuretic in dropsy, urinary obstructions and nephritic cases.

A decoction of the root is the usual form of administration, and it is still considered of use in jaundice and gravel. One pint of boiling

water to 1 OZ. of the twigs, or 1/2 oz. of the bruised fresh root has also been recommended as an infusion, which may be taken as tea.

In scrofulous tumours, advantage has been realized by administering the root in doses of a drachm every morning.

The decoction, sweetened with honey, is said to clear the chest of phlegm and relieve difficult breathing.

The boughs have been employed for flogging chilblains.