

Abstract

Furze

"ALTHOUGH it is now regarded as little better than a troublesome weed, furze formerly played a very considerable role in the rural economy of large areas of Ireland. It was put to such an astonishing number of uses that there can hardly be any other plant in the Irish flora which has been pressed into service for so many and for such a variety of purposes. While some of these are to be appreciated to the full only when seen in their historical perspective, most of them, if no longer alive, are still remembered in the countryside, at least among the older people."¹

Furze belongs to the family *leguminosae* which includes peas, beans, clovers, etc. It can survive and indeed thrive on shallow dry soils even under exposed conditions by virtue of its spiny condition. The evolution of spines rather than normal leaves has minimised the leaf surface area and the consequent water loss by evapotranspiration. They are also a deterrent to grazing animals. Photosynthesis occurs both in the leaf-spines and also on spines of shoot origin thus compensating to some extent for the reduction of photosynthetic surface associated with the spiny condition. The furze, in common with most other members of the *leguminosae*, is equipped with root nodules which contain bacteria capable of fixing nitrogen from the air.

Two species of furze are found in Ireland.² The larger and more common species (*Ulex europaeus*) grows from two to five feet and over in height and flowers from March to May. It is rarely seen above 500 feet in the west or 800 feet in the east of the country, and generally avoids extreme soil conditions; wet peats and limestone crag are usually avoided. The only regions in which it appears to be completely absent are north-west Clare (the Burren region) and parts of north-west Mayo and Donegal. There is evidence that it has been introduced into some of its western and north-western stations, including some sea islands, probably in the first half of the last century. It is most abundant in the south-eastern quarter of the country.

The second species is the dwarf furze (*U. gallii*) which usually grows from one to two feet and flowers in August and September.

1. *Furze—A survey of its history and uses in Ireland*, by A. T. Lucas, Stationery Office, Dublin, 1960.
2. *The Census Catalogue of the Flora of Ireland*, by M. J. P. Scannell and D. M. Synott (Stationery Office, Dublin, 1972) lists a third species *U. Minor* which has been found in only one station in Co. Down. (Abstractor's note.)

It grows best on thin peaty soils and is very rare on calcium rich substrates. In contrast with the last species it is more distinctly southern and eastern in distribution, being absent from considerable areas in the northern half of the country. It can also grow at higher altitudes.

The common name for the plant in Irish is *citeann* though many variants exist. A closely related form is found in Welsh—*cithin*.

Both versions are of great antiquity.

Two English names are in current use in the country. In the northern half "whins" is the name generally used and in the southern half "furze". Both are plural forms, the singulars being given as a "whin bush" and a "fur" (or "fur bush") respectively. "Furry" or "Furzy" are frequently used as the adjectival forms of furze.

The terms for distinction between the two species vary according to the region. Where *U. gillii* is rare or absent—in the northern half of the country, there is often no attempt to distinguish between the two even when they are recognised as separate species. Most of Munster and part of Leinster contrasts with Ulster and much of Connacht in that there is a well developed terminology in both Irish and English distinguishing between the two species. Generally in English *U. europaeus* is known as "English Furze" but in some areas is known as French Furze, e.g. in parts of Wicklow. The name in Irish for this species is *citeann gillda* (i.e. English or "foreign" furze) in parts of Clare, Cork, Kerry, Tipperary, and Waterford and in one locality in Connacht (Moyrus). *Aiteann francach* is also in use in parts of Cork and Kerry; *Francach* here being used for foreign rather than French. The dwarf species—*U. gillii* in English is generally known as "Irish furze". In Irish the almost universal name is *citeann gaeilach* or a variant thereof.

A large body of evidence is discussed showing that furze was of great economic importance from the fifteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth. It is thought that this importance dates from Norman times or possibly much earlier.

From the time of the land enclosure Acts in the first quarter of the eighteenth century furze came to be associated with the "ditches", i.e. bank and dyke, thrown up to separate the fields, owing to the practice of planting furze on top to provide shelter, fuel, fodder, etc. Seed (collected locally or imported) and occasionally young transplants from waste places were used for this. What is often not appreciated is that in addition to its use on hedge banks furze was also grown extensively as a crop, the plants in a few years being sufficiently large to harvest for fodder in the first instance and later

for fuel, etc. These furze "breaks" also supplied shelter for animals in winter.

Lucas' survey revealed furze culture to be an established practice through the southern half of the country and sporadic elsewhere. The practice was most strongly concentrated in the band of country stretching from Kerry to Wexford, including the southern fringes of Clare, Limerick, Tipperary and Kilkenny.

Several methods were and are used for harvesting furze, depending largely on the size of the plants being cut and the purpose for which they were to be used. The furze was generally cut with a sickle while being held down with a forked stick, usually known as a *g bhlóg* (i.e. a little fork). More recently, especially where the furze is old and woody, the sickle is replaced by the bill hook.

The scythe superseded or supplemented the sickle in many areas being well suited to cutting large areas of young plants. Especially strong scythes were sometimes made for this purpose. When using the sickle or bill hook, the hand was protected by a mitten ("*Dornóg*") of strawrope (*si gáin*) or by a leather guard.³ Transport home or to market was by any means available, and each method had established procedures for loading etc. associated with it.

The uses for furze were legion and only the principal ones will be mentioned here. The furze, less the woody material, was prepared as fodder by methods based on chopping or pounding or a combination of both. The operation was generally carried out in a stone or less frequently, wooden trough. A special chopper like a weighted sharp spade was used for cutting it up, or occasionally an old sythe blade was sometimes fitted with a handle and used for this purpose as well as for cutting up other types of fodder. Pounding or "bruising" was usually done with a mallet which was sometimes fitted with blades to effect a cutting action also. In the mid-nineteenth century hand-machines were used for the purpose. Furze was an important food for horses in winter. It was of lesser importance for other livestock. It was occasionally fed to cattle or calves, especially if they were in poor condition. It was sometimes boiled and then fed to pigs and poultry. However its importance as cattle fodder was probably very great in early times prior to the introduction of other winter foods.

Furze makes an excellent rapid-burning fuel and this has always been one of its major uses both at farm level and in urban centres. It was of special value for firing bakers' ovens and was greatly valued for this purpose. It was also used for the following purposes: animal bedding, roof construction in houses, sheds and cattle shelters; as a

3. Largely superseded by a piece of rubber boot or car tyre. (Abstractor's note.)

binder in mud walls; construction of field drains; road foundations, foundations of hay and corn stacks; harrowing; hurleys; walking sticks; chimney cleaning; dyeing in addition to other miscellaneous uses.

Lastly a formula has been recorded from Kerry which classifies soils according to the vegetation:

An t-ór fé'n aiteann,
an t-airgead fé'n luachair,
agus an gorta fé'n bhfraoch.

(Gold under furze, silver under rushes and famine under heather.)⁴

M. J. NEFF

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4. The Welsh hill farmers have a similar rule according to W. M. Candry, in *The Snowdonia National Park* (1967):

Aur dan y rhedyn
Arian dan yr eithyn
Newyn dan y grub

Gold under bracken, Silver under gorse; Famine under heather.
(Abstractor's note.)