



GEORGOFILI WORLD

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BROOM, ITS USE AND TRADITION

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If you were to ask teenagers today what they know about broom (*Spartium junceum* L.), assuming they know it is a plant, they might know that it is a lovely, bright green wild plant that lives at the edge of woods and has yellow flowers. If an experienced middle-aged farmer were asked this, perhaps he would tell us that broom is a weed, it is a bushy-shrub,

with taproots, celebrated in the poetry of Leopardi and d'Annunzio, and I would also add that, during the feast of Corpus Christi, its golden yellow flowers were gathered and used to decorate the streets through which the religious procession passed. Some time ago, a youthful ninety-year-old who I consider my second mum confided to me that the fibers from broom could be used to weave sheets, table cloths, clothes, ropes, and sacks while the waste from producing the raw fiber was used, at one time, to stuff mattresses. All this was duly confirmed by other elderly people who, adding numerous other details, recalled that, during the fascist period in our country's history, broom fibers were used to make elegant, finely-woven products after the import of raw materials including jute was banned. Broom is a leguminous plant that grows spontaneously on escarpments. Through rhizobial symbionts, it fixes atmospheric nitrogen in its own tissues and additionally provides remarkable protection against soil erosion. Its abundant, long, uniform, fibers are sturdy, soft and supple, comparable to hemp and linen. Moreover, its use as a fiber plant has been known since antiquity, with the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks, and Romans making mats, ropes and various other goods. The etymology of the Greek word "Sparos", meaning rope, confirms its use in coarse, resistant fabrics. Found still today in various regions of the Mediterranean, the rural production of panno ginestrino, broom cloth, could indicate that this practice has been handed down since the Greek-Roman period. Families were involved in producing broom fibers, an activity related to their own consumption needs, whereas there is information showing that in the early twentieth century *ginestrifici* (industrial facilities to produce textile fibers from branches of broom) were located in Prato, Scandicci, and Montelupo Fiorentino. The broom fiber extraction was preceded by collecting the stems in bundles that were then left to macerate, after which the bark on the slippery plant bundles was easily peeled off. The "strips" were made by peeling the outside part to separate it from the fiber (stalks). The bundles were then dried and then beaten by hand with a wooden stick until the fiber became completely white. The soft remains were then used to stuff mattresses, while the woody remnants, once dried, were used to start the fire. The filaments were "combed" and passed over a spiked wooden board to produce a thin fiber for lightweight fabrics. The fiber then was transformed into yarn by using rudimentary tools such as hand-made "distaff" that was used to collect the fiber, or the spindle which made the fibers being worked more compact by twisting them to make them thinner. The use of a spinning wheel sped up production and made the thread uniform in diameter, thanks to the driving wheel attached to the support. Finally, the yarn was collected and ready for weaving. I learned about these final steps in the process from my grandmother during the long and beautiful winter evenings spent together near the big fireplace while she was spinning sheep's wool.