

HOME & GARDEN

Plants offer witch protection

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Witches have been flying on Halloween for centuries. In pre-Christian times the Druids began their new year on Nov. 1, celebrating with bonfires in honor of the sun God. However, on the eve of this festival it was believed that Saman, the lord of death, called together all the wicked souls that had died during the year. (They had to spend the year living in the bodies of animals). People who had to travel abroad on that night carried lanterns to protect themselves from evil spirits, and it is from these lanterns that our jack-o'-lantern has evolved.

Witches fly on broomsticks but certainly not on anything resembling the broom we now buy at the hardware store. Witches' brooms were actually supposed to be made of byl-ish, a branch of thorn, mullein stalks, cornstalks or ragweed. These brooms, which looked very much like the quaint, rough brooms we sometimes buy to decorate our hearth, were called besoms, and, although they carried the witch, they were also protection against the witch. This is an example of the "curse and cure" theory, which holds that the same material that can cause evil is also protection against it. In this case, if a broom made of the materials I've mentioned were laid across a doorway, no witch would be able to enter, and the household would be safe from evil.

There were a number of plants that could protect a home from witches. Witches don't like the color yellow because it reminds them of the sun, and the sun brings complete goodness. For this reason hedges of rue, which in season were loaded with tiny yellow flowers, were planted around houses for protection.

Other tree branches like hawthorne, elder, mountain ash or rowan tree could be suspended over a doorway to repel evil spirits. (Again, curse and cure. Although elder was protection against witches, a witch might grow her own elder bush, and when threatened she could leap into an elder branch and disappear).

Thresholds could be strewn with tansy, rosemary or cinquefoil. Garlic is perhaps the most well-known repellent of



vampires and other ghouls and ghosties, and it will also turn away a witch when placed in a doorway.

Even though some plants were powerful protection against witches, a witch had to tend her own garden carefully in order to have the necessary ingredients for her malevolent potions. "Root of hemlock, digged i' the night," vervain, nightshade, belladonna, henbane, mandrake, dill, poplar, poppy, henbane, were all very important to witches, and it is easy to see why all these plants are either strongly soporific or even deadly.

Of course, just picking them wasn't enough. A witch had to know when to pick them. Were they most efficacious when picked in the wax or the wane of the moon? And what to wear? A witch had to be careful to wear pure linen or wool, and often it was important to take in the harvest while naked. It was also very important not to cut plants with an iron knife.

And that is just the beginning of preparing a potion. Herbs had to be mixed in just the right combinations, and often seven or nine bunches of the same herb would be required for a recipe, just as a cake recipe might call for two cups of flour. Odd numbers were very important to witches. They couldn't

even build a simple fire to boil their brew. It took three different kinds of wood to make a truly magical fire.

You can see that it wasn't easy to be a witch. It's hard to garden and harvest during the dark of the moon. And even when the witch eats fern seeds in order to become invisible and go about her evil deeds in peace, there were always those pesky souls who went out searching for witches.

In Germany, it was common knowledge that all you had to do to see a witch was walk out on Christmas Eve carrying a four-leaf clover. In England and the Tyrol a person could gather sprigs of rue, broom straw, agrimony, maiden hair and ground ivy and sew it in a little bag and wear it next to his heart in order to discover witches, no matter how many fern seeds they ate.

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Of course, they are not. Children still lie on the grass of Conger Hill at Foddington in Bedfordshire, England and listen to the witch who lives under the hill frying her Shrove Tuesday pancakes.

Perhaps you could be accused of witchcraft yourself. When was the last time you announced, "I slept like a log last night?" This was the code one witch used to inform another that she had spent the night flying on her malicious rounds. In order not to be suspected, she would leave a log in her bed adorned with her nightcap.

Where will you be on Halloween?

Why not edible landscaping?

HEATING TIPS