



Scientific Name:

Erica multiflora

English:

Mediterranean Heath

Maltese:

*l-erika; leħjet ix-xiħ;
l-issopu;
is-sagħtar l-aħmar;
is-savina*

The Mediterranean Heath is a native shrub of the Mediterranean region (including Malta) which typically grows to 1 m in height, but may sometimes even reach 2 m. Its branches are compact and covered with dark green leaves all year round. At times, the leaves may turn red, and are arranged in whorls of three or sometimes five around the stem. The rigid foliage is needle-like with rounded tips and edges which bend downwards – this feature is thought to have inspired the Maltese name “*leħjet ix-xiħ*”, a name which is also used for many other unrelated plants in Malta. Although the flowers are usually pinkish, white and very pale pink flowers also occur. The flowers have distinctive purplish anthers, are narrow bell-shaped and may either be in small clusters or solitary on the axils of the leaves.

This shrub is rather common in the Maltese Islands and is usually found in garrigues and phryganas, but can also be encountered alongside cliffs and amid boulder screes. Amongst a variety of medicinal properties, the Mediterranean Heath was used as an antiseptic, astringent and diuretic. In Italy, it is also renowned in apiculture for the production of a particular honey. Locally, the species was primarily used, unfortunately in great quantities, as decoration for Christmas cribs since the flowering period coincides with the festive period. The Mediterranean Heath is a plant of national interest, and nowadays it is a species whose exploitation may be subject to management measures stipulated in national legislation.

