

### *Abies alba*

[Synonyms : *Abies excelsa*, *Abies nobilis*, *Abies pectinata*, *Abies picea*, *Abies vulgaris*, *Pinus abies*, *Pinus pectinatus*, *Pinus picea*]

**SILVER FIR** is an evergreen tree. Native to central and southern Europe it has needle-like leaves and long oblong reddish-brown cones.

It is also known as *Abete* (Italian), *Abete bianco* (Italian), *Abio blanka* (Esperanto), *Ädelgran* (Swedish), *Brad* (Romanian), Christmas tree, Common silver fir, *Edel-Tanne* (German), *Eurooppalainen jalokuusi* (Finnish), European fir, European silver fir, *Europeisk ädelgran* (Swedish), *Ffynidwydden Arian* (Welsh), *Fir*, *Jedl'a biela* (Slovak), *Jedle bělokorá* (Czech), *Saksanjalokuusi* (Finnish), *Saksankuusi* (Finnish), *Saksanpihta* (Finnish), *Sapin* (French), *Sapin argenté* (French), *Sapin blanc* (French), *Silbertanne* (German), *Silvergran* (Swedish), *Tanne* (German), *Vanlig ädelgran* (Swedish), *Weisstanne* (German), White fir, and Whitewood.

Essential oil is extracted from the buds, leaves, seeds and twigs.

Warning – the oil must not be used internally, and externally it may cause a skin reaction.

*Alba* means ‘white’ with reference to the colour of the bark.

According to the Greek philosopher Theophrastus (c.372-c.287 BC) lightweight wood from the silver fir was considered to be most suitable for building triremes, the warships with three tiers of rowers.

The silver fir (which authorities state is the tallest native European tree) was once the source of Strassburg Turpentine. Untreated this was referred to as ‘pitch’ once used for caulking ships. It has also been an ingredient both in varnishes and artists’ paints.

In 1603 the tree had reached Britain having spread progressively further and further from its native mountain ranges of central Europe. During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century however silver firs became susceptible to attacks from aphids and finally succumbed in popularity to conifers introduced from north-western North America. Prior to this the silver fir had been sought after throughout western Europe not just for construction work but also for telegraph poles. None of the original trees introduced to England survive there now but a few of their immediate offspring, which began life in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, can still be found in Scotland. Today the largest one in the British Isles is in Argyll, Scotland at the Strone House Pinetum.

The essential oil from silver fir’s aromatic needle-like leaves has long been used commercially in bath preparations, including bath foams and salts. It is also an ingredient for the perfumery industry .

Today this and other related species can be found growing in managed plantations in many northern European countries as a source of softwood for general construction – and after preservative treatment for building docks . It is also used commercially to make furniture, and provides material for pulp (which is ultimately turned into cellulose). This wood is used for matches, packing cases, and masts too. Its resonant properties have also meant that the yellowish to reddish-white wood has been used for the sounding board in musical instruments. And for many countries in Europe the young trees have taken pride of place as the principal species chosen as a Christmas tree.

For the pharmaceutical industry the essential oil is used in inhalatory and aerosol preparations.

Medicinally, silver fir (in the form of oil) has long been recommended for treating asthma, fever, bronchitis, coughs, colds and catarrh, and it has also been used to ease arthritic and rheumatic symptoms. Today folk medicine uses the leaves, buds and fresh resin.