

Cedrus libani

[Synonyms : *Cedrus cedrus*, *Cedrus libanitica*, *Cedrus libanotica*, *Pinus cedrus*]

CEDAR OF LEBANON is an evergreen tree. Native to Asia Minor (particularly Syria and south-eastern Turkey) it has brown cones.

It is also known as Cedarwood, *Céder libanonský* (Slovak), *Cedr libanonský* (Czech), *Cedrwydden Libanus* (Welsh), *Cedro del Libano* (Italian), *Cedro Lebanona* (Esperanto), Himalayan cedar, *Libanonzeder* (German), and *Zeder* (German); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of incorruptible.

The wood (which is resistant to white ants) yields a turpentine-like oil known as *Kelon-ka-tel*, and an essential oil known, like that from the cedar (*Cedrus atlantica*), as Libanol.

Libani means ‘of or from Mount Lebanon (or Lebanon)’.

For Jewish people the tree signifies empire, fragrance and nobility. While in the Christian tradition it is an emblem of Christ.

Cedar resin was not only used by the ancient Egyptians for embalming but it also provided them with a body oil for use after bathing and a very expensive ingredient in perfumes and cosmetics. They made the fragrant yellowish-brown wood into furniture, cases for the mummies and some of the other objects placed in their tombs. The trunks themselves were used in building the pyramids as it was on these that the huge stones were rolled into place. And, as the wood was also found to be water-resistant, it was used for making much of the Egyptian fleet and the ships that plied the Nile. To the recorded amazement of archaeologists who were excavating at Giza in the 1950s, they found that when 4,000 year old cedarwood was unearthed it was not only whole but still emitted its fragrance.

The wood was sought after all over the Middle East over thousands of years. It was familiar to the Hebrews who recorded that Noah’s ark was made from it and that it was also used in King Solomon’s temple and palace. They were built in about 1000 BC with massive quantities of cedarwood felled in the forests on Mount Lebanon. From there the wood was taken to the Mediterranean coast, floated south to today’s Tel Aviv and then transported to Jerusalem. Traditional tales report that the whole project involved 80,000 woodcutters. (The early 21st Century saw ongoing debate among some scholars as to the actual existence of Solomon’s temple for which apparently archaeological evidence was slim to that date if not non-existent although evidence of similar temples elsewhere in the Middle East had been found.) Another building for which it was used was the palace of Nebuchadnezzar (died 562 BC) at Babylon. Yet despite its use for hundreds and hundreds of years, particularly in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, cedar forests still existed by the time the Crusaders appeared in the region in the 11th to 13th Centuries – when yet more trees were brought down to build palaces for these European invaders.

Now those vast Lebanese forests have long gone and the remains of them can be seen today in one small park containing only a few hundred trees. While in Turkey a little further north most of the few remaining Cedar of Lebanon forests there are even now suffering from over-felling. Of the relatively few trees still standing the oldest is thought to be about 4,000 years old, and they continue to be held in such regard by local people that Special Forces have been allocated during the violent unrest of recent years to try and protect these areas. In the late 20th Century countries in the region were seeking international

recognition and help in saving those survivors. All this activity proved to be fruitful as in 1996 the Lebanese Government passed a law which forbids any damage to the surviving cedars. Not only have nature reserves and National Heritage Sites been established for two cedar forests but it is envisaged that the thousands of little cedar trees planted in the 1960s will also have an assured opportunity to mature into sustainable forests in 50-100 years from then.

Cedar of Lebanon has been depicted on the national coat of arms of Lebanon for hundreds of years and it also appears on her flag.

This species provides the principle timber of northern India.

The tree was introduced to Britain and the very few seen there were associated with superstition reminiscent of that surrounding the linden tree (lime, *Tilia cordata*). A branch would fall whenever a member of the family connected with the tree died. For such a tree in Derbyshire stories are told of how it lost a limb when Lord Carnarvon (1866-1923) died after Tut'ankhamun's tomb was unearthed in Egypt in 1922.

Essential oil is sometimes used commercially today by the perfumery industry. The wood itself is a prized building material and is also used for making railway sleepers.

Medicinally, the essential oil is used for similar purposes to those to which cedar's (*Cedrus atlantica*) oil is put eg. bronchitis and tuberculosis.