

*Cistus creticus*

[Synonyms : *Cistus incanus*, *Cistus incanus* subsp. *creticus*, *Cistus villosus*, *Cistus villosus* var. *creticus*]

**GUM CISTUS** is an evergreen shrub. Native to the eastern Mediterranean it has small, pink flowers with many yellow stamens.

It is also known as Black balsam, *Cist krétský* (Czech), *Cisto Kreta* (Esperanto), *Cist šedavý krétský* (Czech), Cretan rock-rose, Gallipolli rose, *Graubehaarte Zistrose* (German), Grey cistus, Hoary rock-rose, Labdanum, *Ladhania* (Greek), Pink rock-rose, and Rockrose: and in flower language is said to be a symbol of ‘I shall die tomorrow’.

The flowers last individually for only a few hours to be superseded by others. The sticky, piny-smelling gum that exudes from the stems can scent the air across a large area in warm weather.

The gum (‘ladanum’ or ‘labdanum’) used to be harvested by pulling a cloth or leather thonged flail through the plants on the hottest days. The goatherds also collected it from their flocks. They combed it out of beards and off legs where it had stuck as the animals fed. The twigs have also been boiled so that the gum is melted and can be skimmed off the water-surface. More recently however the resin has been removed from young leaf tops with alcohol.

*Creticus* means ‘of or from Crete’.

Occasionally today the resin is still used as a fixative in perfume, and in soaps and cosmetics, and it is also used in making medicinal plasters). It is one of the most ancient commodities in the eastern Mediterranean and some authorities believe that the ancient Egyptians may have been trading it during the First Dynasty (c. 3188 BC). The majority of the trade centred on the islands of Cyprus and Crete by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the former’s fame for this was recognised when a sought-after perfume, in which this resin was a significant ingredient), was named ‘Chypre’.

It is suggested that in Genesis (chapter 37 verse 25, and chapter 43 verse 11) of the *Bible’s* Old Testament there could have been a mistranslation. The ‘myrrh’ mentioned in the text was probably ladanum or gum cistus resin.

The scent of the plant resin is familiar on many Mediterranean islands. There are those that claim Napoleon believed he could recognise his Corsican home with his eyes closed because of it.

In several Arabian countries the leaves have been used to make a tea.

Some authorities believe that gum cistus was introduced to Britain in 1650. It was an extremely important ingredient in making pomanders.

Medicinally, the balsam has been used by European herbalists in remedies for bronchitis; and in Brazil the plant has been employed in the treatment of leprosy.