

Commiphora gileadensis

[Synonyms : *Balsamodendrum opobalsamum*, *Commiphora opobalsamum*]

BALM OF GILEAD is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to Arabia it has a few small, reddish or white flowers.

It is also known as *Arabialainen mirhami* (Finnish), *Balasan* (Hindi), Balsam of Gilead, Balsam of Judea, Balsam of Mecca, Balessan, Balsam tree, Bechan, *Gileadinpalsami* (Finnish), Mecca balsam , Mecca myrrh, Opobalsam, and Treacle of Gilead.

Resin exudes from the bark in Summer (either naturally or aided by incisions) and its quantity increases as the humidity rises.

It is rare and subject to preservation orders in its natural habitat.

The resin from the stem mentioned in the *Bible*, of what authorities consider is the ‘real’ balm of Gilead, would have been used medicinally and was reputed to have miraculous properties. This resin was also burnt in incense and was an ingredient in perfume. (Lumps of it were dissolved in warm olive oil (*Olea europaea*) and strained to provide a liquid.)

Theophrastus (c.372-c.287 BC), the Greek philosopher who studied under Aristotle, speaks highly of balm of Gilead in those of his treatises on plants that have survived the centuries. There is no doubt of this esteem in the 1st Century as several well-known writers of that period also refer to it in laudatory terms, including the Jewish historian and soldier, Flavius Josephus (c.37-c.100). He tells how the Queen of Sheba brought the tree from Arabia to Judea as a present for Solomon (c.1015-977 BC), king of Israel, and once in Judaea it was particularly cultivated on Mount Gilead hence its common name. Both the early Greek physicians, Dioscorides in the 1st Century and Galen (c.130-c.201) in the following one, record the virtues of the tree’s essence. And Pliny the Elder (23-79), the Roman natural historian who, among other things is reputed for his *Historia Naturalis*, records that balm of Gilead was brought to Rome at the beginning of that Century by Emperor Vespasian’s (9-79) generals.

The tree yielding the prized resin or juice is not only said to be difficult to grow but is also extremely rare today. (It is now believed to be extinct in Egypt and India.) Exportation from its natural habitat is prohibited and has been so for most of the 20th Century. Some say one specimen grows, guarded, in the Middle Eastern desert. Oil extracted from the incised juice is rarely available in a pure state.

Nowadays medicinal remedies rely on the leaf buds of the *Populus candicans*, a tree often called ‘balm-of-Gilead’ too.