

Commiphora myrrha

[Synonyms : *Balsamodendrum myrrha*, *Commiphora molmol*, *Commiphora myrrha* var. *molmol*, *Commiphora opobalsamum*]

MYRRH is a deciduous shrub or tree. Found wild in very hot scrubland areas from north-east Africa to Arabia (particularly in Arabia and Somaliland), it has small, yellow-red flowers. It is also known as Abyssine myrrh, *Albero del mirra* (Italian), *Arbol de mirra* (Spanish), *Arbre à myrrhe* (French), *Bilsan* (Urdu), Common myrrh tree, *Echter Myrrhenbaum* (German), *Gandharash* (Bengali), Gum myrrh, Gum myrrh tree, Harobol myrrh, Harobol tree, Mecca myrrh, *Miorr* (Irish Gaelic), *Mirhami* (Finnish), *Mirra* (Italian, Spanish), *Mur maki* (Urdu), *Myrrha* (Swedish), *Myrrhe* (French, German), *Rasagandhi* (Sanskrit), True myrrh, and *Vellaippolam* (Malayalam); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of gladness.

Cuts are made in the bark (generally near the ground), and the reddish-yellow fluid that emerges solidifies into tears upon exposure to the air and is collected in baskets. Essence is obtained by distillation.

The common name Myrrh comes from the old Hebrew and Arabian word *mur* meaning ‘bitter’ and refers to the taste of the plant. For many many centuries the fragrant dried resin has been an ingredient in incense (particularly with frankincense, *Boswellia sacra*) and in embalming ointments, fumigants and perfumes. [*Stacte*, which was also known to the ancient Greeks but cannot be found today, is believed to have been a natural liquid excretion of a closely related species to myrrh, whereas the bark of the myrrh only gives up its gum after bruising or incision.]

One of the earliest known records of myrrh appears in an ancient Egyptian papyrus of about 2000 BC. There are many references to myrrh in the Old Testament of the *Bible*, particularly in the Book of Exodus which describes how Moses (who lived in the 13th Century and early part of the 12th Century BC) was instructed to use myrrh as one of the main ingredients in a holy oil used for anointing priests. Another reference in the Song of Solomon compares myrrh to the joys of sex. The most familiar reference however is likely to be that which appears in the Book of Matthew, in the New Testament of the *Bible*, and records that myrrh was one of the Wise Men’s gifts to the newborn child. [This brings to mind an English tradition that occurs annually in the Chapel Royal of St. James’s Palace and dates back to the Middle Ages. In its original form the Monarch participated personally but from the early 19th Century, the end of George III’s reign when he had succumbed to mental illness, two Gentleman Ushers have performed the function on the Sovereign’s behalf. During the offertory at the Epiphany Service held there they lay three silk purses containing gold (twenty-five gold sovereigns), frankincense (*Boswellia sacra*) and myrrh on alms dishes and carry these to the altar rails. After the Service the golden sovereigns are exchanged for £25 in modern coinage and this is distributed to the poor and the elderly.]

The ancient Greeks adopted a Syrian legend that recounts the origin of the plant. According to this myth, Myrrha refused to pay the goddess, Aphrodite, the adulation she thought her due and Aphrodite’s anger was so great that she caused Myrrha to commit incest with her father, Thesis, the king of Syria. On the twelfth night he saw through Myrrha’s disguise

and threatened to knife her, and in order to save her from this death, the gods transformed Myrrha into a Myrrh tree and her tears are represented by the clear fragrant gum resin it exudes.

Today it is still used as a perfuming powder in pot pourris and as a paste in pomanders. And on a commercial scale the resin is an ingredient used by the pharmaceutical industry in gargles, mouthwashes and ointments (as well as in veterinary medicines). It is used by the toiletry industry in toothpastes, by the perfumery industry in incense and by the drinks industry as a flavouring.

It was also one of the at least 36 ingredients used by Mithridates (c.132-63 BC), the 1st Century King of Pontus (northern Turkey), in a poison antidote (known as Antidotum Mithridaticum or Theriac) which he took daily to acquire an overall immunity – an important consideration if it is remembered that he gained his position of power by poisoning his opposition.

Medicinally, since the Middle Ages particularly, European herbalists recommended it for treating period problems, oral disorders, fluid retention, encouraging appetite, indigestion, catarrh, ulcers and worms. Today it can be used internally for treating stomach complaints, tonsillitis and gum inflammation, and can be externally applied on boils, ulcers and wounds. Recent research has been successful in synthesizing myrrh and this indicates that the plant may have anaesthetic qualities that could well have been used in the past and may prove to be valuable now.