

Cupressus sempervirens

ITALIAN CYPRESS is an evergreen tree. Native to western Asia and south-eastern Europe, it has small glossy, dull grey cones.

It is also known as *Aitosyressi* (Finnish), *Ciprés* (Spanish), *Cipress kannella* (Maltese), *Cypress*, *Cypřiš stálezelený* (Czech), *Cypřiš vždyzelený* (Czech), *Cyprus vždyzelený* (Slovak), *Funeral cypress*, *Italian upright cypress*, *Mediterranean cypress*, *Mediterranean upright cypress*, *Mittelmeer-Zypresse* (German), *Sara* (Hindi), *Saroo* (Urdu), *Säulenzypresse* (German), *Surahva* (Sanskrit), *Suram* (Malayalam, Tamil), and *Zypresse* (German); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of death, despair, eternal sorrow, immortality, mourning, and rebirth.

Yellowish, aromatic oil is distilled from leafy shoots.

Warning – Italian cypress is poisonous for animals, particularly cattle.

Sempervirens is made up of Latin *semper* (always) and *vivo* (to live, be alive) components meaning ‘evergreen’.

When archaeologists examined the tomb of the 18th dynasty boy-king, Tut’ankhamun (who died c. 1340 BC) they found that the outer coffin was made of fragrant, red cypress wood that must have been imported. (It was used for other Egyptian coffins of that period as well.) The Phoenicians introduced the tree to the Mediterranean when they settled in Cyprus. The Island, which actually worshipped the tree, derives its name from the plant.

In both Greek and Roman mythology the cypress was associated with the Underworld.

Cyparissus, in Greek legend, was one of the young men loved by Apollo. Heartbroken after carelessly killing one of Apollo’s favourite sacred stags, the gods transformed him into the Italian Cypress at his own wish. In ancient Greece what is said to have been one of the most beautiful annual festivals was held after the harvest. This was the *Adonia* that commemorated the death of Adonis and in the processions the goddess was portrayed carrying cypress. The tree was also assigned to Aphrodite, the goddess of love.

In Roman mythology the cypress was dedicated to the unpopular Dis Pater (one of the Underworld divinities known to the Greeks as Pluto) and also to Silvanus, a forest god who was popular in Roman times.

The Greek philosopher, Theophrastus (c.327-c.287) who studied under Aristotle, mentions how the doors of a then recently constructed temple were made from this wood that had been growing at Ephesus (the Italian cypress wood had been felled ‘four generations’ earlier). The ancient Greeks also used it for building ships and houses, as well as for carving statues (as did the Phoenicians and Cretans) – and Dioscorides, the 1st Century Greek physician, mentions its use in medicine for treating dysentery and other ailments.

The hard and durable wood was used for the gates of Istanbul, and apparently it was also chosen for the original great doors of St. Peter’s, Rome that are now made of bronze.

The Venerable Bede (c.673-735), the renowned Anglo-Saxon scholar, theologian and historian, suggested that the Cross on which Christ was crucified had been made of four types of wood namely box (*Buxus sempervirens*), cedar (*Cedrus*), cypress and pine (*Pinus*). These woods were said to represent the four quarters of the world.

In the past the leaves and fruit of the Italian cypress were used, in infusion with vinegar, as a black hair dye.

Italian cypress is often cultivated as a windbreak.

Today the timber (which will withstand woodworm) is sought after for works of art, and because of its fragrance it is also made into clothes chests.

Medicinally, it was used by herbalists to treat lung disorders, stem blood and heal wounds, as well as as a remedy for skin ulcers, carbuncles and circulatory problems.

It is the birthday flower for 11th February.