

*Fraxinus ornus*

[Synonyms : *Fraxinus floribunda*, *Ornus europaeus*]

**FLOWERING ASH** is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to western Asia, the eastern Mediterranean and southern Europe, it has heavily scented, creamy white flowers and leaves that turn purple in Autumn.

It is also known as Ash, *Blumenesche* (German), *Esche* (German), European manna tree, Flake manna, Flowering ash, *Frassino avoriello* (Italian), *Frassino fiorito* (Italian), *Frêne à fleurs* (French), *Frêne à manna* (French), *Jasan manový* (Czech), *Jasan zimnář* (Czech), Manna, Manna ash, *Mannaask* (Swedish), *Mannaesche* (German), *Muzahar dis budagi* (Turkish), *Orne* (French), *Orniello* (Italian), *Orno* (Italian), Pelion ash, *Shirkhist* (Persian), *Shirkhist* (Hindi), and South European Flowering ash; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of grandeur.

The brown keys are dispersed by the wind. The tree's branches when damaged by insects exude pale yellow sap that has a strange odour and sweetish taste.

The yellow-white sugary juice or sap is collected on a dry day during the flowering period by making incisions in the bark. (When dried it retains its colour.).

Warning – flowering ash can cause flatulence.

*Ornus* is a Latin name for this species and possibly mountain ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*) as well.

Flowering ash wood was used in ancient Egypt in their powerful 'composite' bows popular there until about 1100 BC. These weapons, for which this wood is thought to have been imported, were originally invented in about 1600 BC in western Asia and used different woods glued to form a laminated strip which was then carved to the bow shape (in contrast to the single wood of 'self bows').

The term 'manna' is applied to several edible substances most of which are sweet. This species does not yield the manna referred to in biblical scriptures which has not, as yet, been precisely identified and about which there are several theories. [Some authorities believe it was a lichen, others that it was the syrup-like drops which can be found on or under the tamarisk tree (*Tamarix gallica*) at certain times of the year and yet others that it could be a fungus. This last could be partially supported by a 1930s report of a Mr. A.J. Swann in his book entitled *Fighting the Slave Driver in Central Africa*. He describes manna (which he did not refer to as 'fungus') seen on the plateaux between Lakes Tanganyika and Nyasa as being similar to coriander seed (*Coriandrum sativum*), but white (like hoar frost) and sweet-tasting. It (if a fungus) apparently disintegrated in sunshine and needed to be baked to be kept for any length of time (otherwise overnight the substance would have been full of worms). Other travellers are said to have made a similar sighting but at spasmodic intervals.]

It is understood that the manna known today, particularly that obtained from the flowering ash, was probably unheard of before the 15<sup>th</sup> Century when it was imported to western Europe from some unidentified source in the East. From the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century however manna was collected from the flowering ash in Calabria in southern Italy. In due time Sicily imported trees from Palermo and eventually took over sole production until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Italy viewed this trade as so important that in 1927 she defined 'manna' in law in order to contain fraudulent exports and adulteration. Today it

can still be obtained from southern Europe (as well as parts of Asia) and is still used for medicinal purposes not least as a laxative suitable for children.  
Today the pieces of the dried sap are used on a commercial basis by the pharmaceutical industry in mild laxatives.