

*Pistacia atlantica*

[Synonyms : *Pistacia cabulica*, *Pistacia mutica*]

**MOUNT ATLAS PISTACHE** is a semi-evergreen tree. Native to the eastern Mediterranean and to North Africa it has small inconspicuous, greenish-white flowers.

It is also known as *Almacigo* (Canary Island), Atlantic pistachia, Atlantic pistachio, Bombay mastic, Mount Atlas mastic, Mount Atlas mastic tree, *Pistacia atlantica* (German), Turpentine tree, and Wild pistachio.

The tree is most tolerant of drought because of its extremely deep roots so much so that its leaves can remain green even in a drought year.

The method of harvesting ‘raw turpentine’ from the tree’s branches has developed over centuries. In order to allow the bark’s revival this is performed on a minimum 3-yearly cycle. Precise cuts are made in the bark, clay pots are secured under each cut and once the resin stops oozing the pot is collected. Traditionally this resin is then boiled to yield turpentine and another product known as colophony.

*Atlantica* means ‘of or from the Atlas Mountains (North Africa) or shores of the Atlantic’.

Some authorities believe that it is more likely to have been the Mount Atlas pistache that is referred to in Hosea (Chapter 13) in the Old Testament of the *Bible* as the tree idolised in pagan ritual than another of its close relatives Palestine pistacia (*Pistacia palaestina*) native in that region. These large and long-lived trees have been landmarks in the region and venerated to the point that until relatively recently they became memorials to the dead in some Arab villages.

Ripe fruit (which yield an edible oil) can still be found for sale in some Middle Eastern markets.

The turpentine boiled out of the branches’ resin is considered to be one of the important commodities exported from the region. It would appear that the prime market is Europe and in particular Germany. Turpentine is used in pesticides, as well as by dye and paint manufacturers, and the cosmetics and toiletry industries. The by-product colophony is also valuable as this is not only used by the printing industry and in the manufacture of plastics but is also a fundamental ingredient in some commercial chewing gum.

Galls (called by some ‘turpentine galls’) are sold in local markets and used for tanning making inks and dyes.

Livestock are allowed to browse the trees and the aromatic pale green leaflets are also harvested for fodder.

In its homeland (and now further afield as in California in the United States) the tree can be seen cultivated not only for its shade but also for its ornamental qualities.

Syria once boasted forests of Mount Atlas pistache covering hundreds of thousands of acres but today these have reduced to about a fifth of the area.

Medicinally, local herbalists have used the resin and the galls in some treatments.