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Santalum album

[Synonyms : *Santalum myrtifolium*, *Sirium myrtifolium*]

SANDALWOOD is an evergreen, partly parasitic tree. Native to India and Malaysia it has small straw-coloured maturing to reddish yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Agarurgandhaka* (Sanskrit), *Ashtaka* (Sanskrit), *Bois de santal* (French), *Bois santal* (French), *Bukum* (Sanskrit), *Candana* (Indonesian), *Cendana kuning* (Malay), *Chandan* (Punjabi), *Chandana* (Javanese, Sundanese), *Chandanam* (Malayalam), *Chanda-namaram* (Tamil), *Chandanamu* (Telugu), *Chantana* (Thai), *Chaudana* (Sanskrit), Citron sanders, East Indian sandalwood, *Handum* (Singhalese), Indian sandalwood, *Ragata-chandane* (Hindi), *Safed chandan* (Hindi), *Sandal* (Urdu), *Sandalia* (Spanish), *Sandalo* (Italian), *Sandalo bianco* (Italian), *Sandal-surkh* (Persian), *Sandelbaum* (German), *Sandelholz* (German), *Sandelträd* (Swedish), Sanders-wood, *Sandtelbaum* (German), *Santal blanc* (French), *Santal des Indes* (French), *Santelipuu* (Finnish), *Sukhad* (Bengali, Gujarati), *Sundul atamar* (Arabic), *T'an hsiang* (Chinese), True sandalwood, *Weisser Sanderbaum* (German), White sandalwood, White saunders, Yellow sandalwood, Yellow sanders, and Yellow saunders.

Harvesting the wood is an age-old process. 50 year old trees are either cut down or uprooted and their branches and roots are removed. The trunks are then left on the ground for several months during which time the white ants eat away the outer layer of sapwood. This leaves the only commercially usable part of the tree the disease resistant and heavy, fragrant light yellow heartwood. This is either reserved or with the roots subjected to distillation or pressing to obtain the oil and the remainder of the tree is discarded.. Sandalwood oil is viscous and yellow to pale yellow with a long-lasting fragrance and a similar oil is obtained from other species in the same family.

Album means 'white' with reference to the flowers.

Sandalwood has played an important role in Buddhist and Hindu ritual for hundreds and hundreds of years – the oil as an ingredient in incense and embalming, and the wood supplies material for building temples and funeral pyres. Today Hindu women use a paste made from the ground wood on their foreheads and the Buddhists still use sandalwood in their funeral rites and other ceremonies.

This wood was being imported by China in the 6th Century via Cambodia – and after this trade missions carried it there as a goodwill gift. She was still importing it in 1200 when her officials recognized that some of it emanated from what is now Indonesian Java, as well as from India and Malaysia. (In time the Malaysian wood was considered to be inferior to that obtainable from India.) It was used in Chinese rituals by Buddhist priests, and it was an ingredient in joss sticks. In the early 16th Century the respected Portuguese viceroy, Alburquerque (1453-1515) set about establishing the Portuguese East Indies once he had set foot on the south-west Indian coastline in 1502. The port of Malacca (now Melaka in Malaysia) was quickly to become one of the Portuguese dependencies and when Alburquerque first landed there he was presented with sandalwood as a tribute.

Authorities suggest that sandalwood (or red sandalwood, *Pterocarpus santalinus*) may be the 'almug' or 'almug trees' referred to in the *Bible* (1 Kings, 10:11) and used by Solomon for the Temple at Jerusalem.

The heartwood also featured in the kitchen in medieval Europe where it was used to impart a red colouring to food.

Locally the wood has not only been used to make objects such as boxes and frames but it has also been burnt as fuel.

Today the oil is used by the perfumery industry eg. in the Indian perfume *Abir*, and it can be an ingredient in the toiletry industry's soaps and ointments. The cosmetics industry uses the powdered wood, and the heartwood itself (which can still be used for building) is made into carved boxes, small pieces of furniture and, in China particularly, joss sticks.

Medicinally, herbalists have used oil of sandalwood to treat cystitis, some venereal disease and chronic bronchitis. The powdered wood has been used to treat venereal disease and dysentery.