

Styrax benzoin

BENZOIN is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to south-eastern Asia (particularly Indonesia) it has small sweetly scented, white flowers.

It is also known as *Belzuino* (Italian), Benjamin tree, *Benjoin* (French), *Benjuí* (Spanish), *Benzoebaum* (German), Gum Benjamin, Gum benzoin, *Kemenyan* (Javanese, Malay), *Luban* (Bengali, Hindi), Palembang benzoin, Siam benzoin, *Stirako benzoa* (Esperanto), *Storace benzoino* (Italian), *Styrač benzoový* (Czech), Styrax (English, Swedish), *Styrax benzoový* (Slovak), and Sumatra benzoin.

The reddish-brown resin which has a balsamic scent is obtained by making a triangular wound in the bark of trees at least 7 years old. The exuding sap hardens upon exposure to air.

Benzoin is derived either from an Arabic name for a different plant or local name for an ‘aromatic gum’.

In Malaysia benzoin has played a role in many rituals not least those enacted when the rice (*Oryza*) is harvested. The fragrant resin is also burnt as incense in mosque and home in many countries in the East. It has been used sparingly as a flavouring in cigarettes too.

The oldest known written reference to benzoin is believed to have been that made by the Sanskrit lexicographer Amarasingha (probably 6th Century). It is also mentioned in Chinese literature as it was being imported by China from the Malaysian region in the last half of the 8th Century. Some authorities believe that by 1200 the Arabs were trading the fragrant resins – frankincense (*Boswellia sacra*, from southern Arabia), storax (*Styrax officinalis*, brought from the eastern Mediterranean) and benzoin (picked up in south-eastern Asian ports on their trading routes) – in the Chinese port of Canton and authorities believe that records could indicate the Arabs’ preference for the latter. At this point the Europeans were still unfamiliar with it.

Then in 1498 the Portuguese navigator and discoverer, Vasco da Gama (c.1469-1525) arrived in Calicut on the western coast of southern India and was presented with benzoin as a gift. Two years later his peer and fellow countryman, Cabral (c.1467-c.1520) followed him after detours to Brazil and Mozambique. When he arrived in Calicut he established the first commercial treaty between Portugal and India and returned to his homeland in 1501 with benzoin as part of his cargo.

Benzoin yields sodium benzoate which has sometimes been added in very small amounts to processed food to slow its deterioration.

Today the resin is used in incense and other aromatic products, and by the perfumery industry (particularly as a fixative).

By 1800 benzoin’s antiseptic qualities were being harnessed particularly in ‘Simple’ and ‘Compound Tinctures of Benzoin’ which were being used (and still are) as preservatives in both medicinal and cosmetic remedies. A modern pharmaceutical example is provided in Friar’s Balsam.

Medicinally, today apart from coughs and bronchitis, it is also used for treating wounds and sores.