

Tamarix gallica

[Synonyms : *Tamarix algeriensis*, *Tamarix anglica*, *Tamarix troupii*]

TAMARISK (Danish, English, Swedish) is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to southern Europe it has minute fragrant, white or pink flowers.

It is also known as Brummel, Cedar bread, Common tamarisk, Cypress, English tamarisk, *Französische Tamariske* (German), French tamarisk, French tamarix, French tree, *Gallische Tamariske* (German), *Grugbren* (Welsh), Italian tamarisk, *Javnu-jhadu* (Gujarati), *Jhao* (Urdu), *Jhau* (Bengali, Hindi), *Jhavuka* (Sanskrit), *Jhavukam* (Malayalam), *Kiri* (Tamil), Manna plant, *Pilchi* (Punjabi), Salt cedar, *Sirasaru* (Telugu), *Sirusavukku* (Tamil), *Tamargueira* (Portuguese), *Tamarin* (French), *Tamarinier* (French), *Tamaris* (French), *Tamariška francúzska* (Slovak), *Tamariske* (German), *Tamarix* (French), *Tamaryšek francouzský* (Czech), *Tamaryšek galský* (Czech), *Tamathin* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Tameriske* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), and *Taray* (Spanish); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of crime.

Gallica means ‘of or from France’.

Some authorities believe tamarisk came into Britain first through Cornwall in the mid-16th Century, while others quote from the records of the celebrated 17th Century clergyman and antiquary, Reverend Thomas Fuller (1608-1661) who claimed that it was first cultivated there in Fulham near London. Apparently the English prelate, Edmund Grindal (1519-1583) was supposed to have brought a plant back with him from Germany in 1558 and planted it in the garden of Fulham Palace. (He had been a Westminster prebendary during Edward VI’s reign but lived on the Continent, including Germany, while Mary I was on the throne and only returned to his homeland on the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558 – eventually to become archbishop of Canterbury in 1575.) But those who oppose this second theory base their opinion on the view that even if the overall story proved to be true the plant would actually have been German tamarisk (which has recently been placed in a different genus with the name *Myricaria germanica*).

Tamarisk is mentioned in many old writings including the *Bible*, and some authorities believe that the ‘manna’ referred to in the latter’s pages is the resinous substance found on or under the tamarisk tree. [Other authorities believe that it was a lichen, yet others that it could be a fungus. However the manna obtained today from the flowering ash (*Fraxinus ornus*) has never been viewed as a likely contender.] Returning to the tamarisk’s gum it was thought originally to be exuded from the bodies of insects attracted to the tree but it is actually beads of slightly aromatic, sweet-tasting sap that squeeze through punctures made by a particular insect. Initially it is transparent and clear but as it crystallizes it begins to resemble barley sugar. This is collected from the ground where it has fallen or is shaken from the branches (before sunrise – otherwise it would melt). The quantity appears to depend upon the amount of Winter rain in the area and is most abundant after especially heavy rainfall. The Arabs consider it to be a delicacy.

Centuries ago the Romans used the shrub to make brooms and they also bound it round the heads of criminals. The Arabs burnt tamarisk as a fuel and also respected it as a source of medicine, as well as offering material for making drinking vessels. In Britain in the Middle Ages tamarisk wood was said to have been used for carving cups, dishes and spits

as it was believed to impart flavour to ale and food. [Presumably the wood was imported to northern Europe at that time if the earliest indications of the plant's introduction to Britain are believed to be in the mid-16th Century.] In the Scilly Isles and Cornwall fishermen used the branches to make their lobster pots.

The wood seems to have been especially important in North America to some of the Keresan Indians who used it for building. Locally North American children have eaten the flowers which they called Cedar bread.

Tamarisk is one of the plants cultivated on beaches to stabilize the movement of shingle and sand.

Today tamarisk is sometimes cultivated as hedging in temperate areas. It is also used by the tanning industry and it provides a colouring substance for dyeing fabrics.

Medicinally, herbalists recommended tamarisk in the treatment of colic, jaundice, piles and snake bites. In India the galls have been used in remedies for dysentery and diarrhoea.

It is the birthday flower for 8th October.