

# Herbs Make Scents



THE HERB SOCIETY OF AMERICA  
VOLUME XL2, NUMBER 1

SOUTH TEXAS UNIT  
JANUARY 2022

Co-Editors Linda Alderman ([ewalderman@comcast.net](mailto:ewalderman@comcast.net)) & Janice Freeman ([janicehfreeman@comcast.net](mailto:janicehfreeman@comcast.net))

## Jan. 2022 Calendar

Jan. 11, Tues. 10:00 am

**Day Meeting for Members Only**, "Growing Citrus in Our Area," will be presented by **Janis Teas** at the home of **Pam Harris**. **Bring a sack lunch and drink**. Dessert will be provided.

Jan. 19, Wed. 7:00 pm

**Evening Meeting** "Brigid of Kildare - Goddess, Saint, and Holy Woman," will be presented by **Professor Jonathan Ó Néill**, Assistant Director of Irish Studies, University of St. Thomas. The In-Person Gathering is at the Cherie Flores Garden Pavilion in Hermann Park (1500 Hermann Drive, Houston, TX 77004) and is open to the public. Watch your email and our Facebook page for updates. **Masks required!**

**Full Moon Ramble** (Zoom gathering for Members Only)

Jan. 27, Thurs 7:00 pm

## Feb. 2022 Calendar

Feb. 8, Tues. 10:00 am

Save the date for the **Day Meeting**

Feb. 16, Wed. 7:00 pm

**Evening Meeting** "Herbal Love Charms, Spells, and Potions"

The speaker is pending at this time - **Volunteers are encouraged!** The In-Person Gathering is at the Cherie Flores Garden Pavilion in Hermann Park (1500 Hermann Drive, Houston, TX 77004) and is open to the public. **Masks required!**

Date to be determined

**Full Moon Ramble** (Zoom gathering for Members Only)

**Newsletter deadline: the 25<sup>th</sup> of every month is strictly enforced**  
(February editor is Linda Alderman)



Tarragon

## Happy Birthday Capricorns!

December 22—January 20

12/31 - Laura Boston  
1/6 - Donna Wheeler

### Herbs for Capricorns

Rosemary  
Tarragon  
Caraway  
Chamomile  
Marjoram

[Horoscope Signs and Corresponding Herbs \(thespruce.com\)](http://thespruce.com)



## **Chairman's Corner**

**Everything that slows us down and forces patience, everything that sets us back into the slow circles of nature, is a help.**

**Gardening is an instrument of grace. - May Sarton**

I am sure none of us thought we would spend the holidays with renewed precautions for Covid. We are slowed down once more by a new variant and we are forced to be patient yet again. So, here we are. We are called upon to draw on our inner resources to make the best of the situation. We all know that gardening is one way to charge our batteries and do something useful.

I am excited about our upcoming January meeting. The topic is St. Brigid, another strong woman and herbalist. St. Brigid's feast day is celebrated on February 1, the same day as the pagan festival of Imbolc which honors the goddess Brigid. We plan to weave St. Brigid's Crosses from grasses and reeds as part of the meeting. I hope that many of you can join us for this activity. As fun as this will be, there are good reasons to be wary of public gatherings these days.

As we 'go to press' the highly transmissible Omicron variant is causing Covid cases to rise nationwide. Although Texas still has relatively low numbers, this will most certainly change and will no doubt impact our ability to have the meeting. We have not canceled at this point, but please know that we may have to cancel and will let you know by MailChimp what Plan B will look like. We have directories to deliver to those who did not pick them up at meetings or Herb Fair. We will need to mail about a dozen of them, but we can deliver directories to people who live in Houston. If you can help deliver some directories to members call me. I have grouped together people who live close to one another.

So, bloom where you are planted my friends, make a trip to our patch of ground at Westbury, invite friends to garden with you, and spend time in nature. We are lucky we are in a climate where we can spend time outside and in our gardens. It is, in fact, one of the best times to garden in Houston.

**Julie Fordes  
Unit Chair**

**St. Brigid Cross**





Announcing our January 19, 2022  
HSA-STU Evening Gathering Program

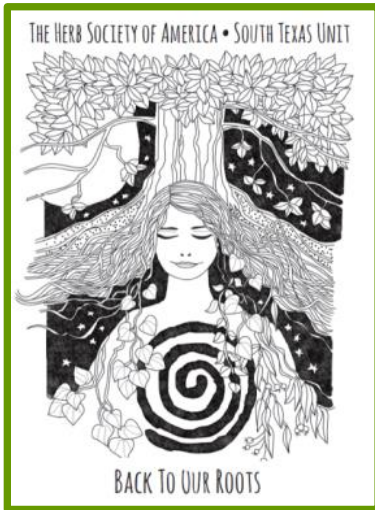


Image Credit Sulamith Wülfing 'The Way'

Brigid of Kildare -  
Goddess, Saint, and Holy Woman

Presented by:  
Professor Jonathan Ó Néill  
University of St. Thomas  
Assistant Director of Irish Studies

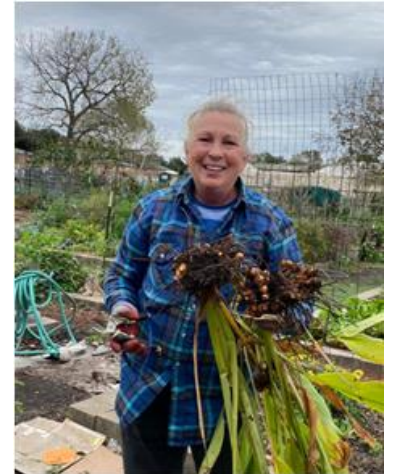




## BACK TO OUR ROOTS

Julie Fordes

The workdays we held at the Westbury Community Garden were a big success. Thanks to all the members who came out over the three days, **Janice Stuff, Joan Jordan, Mary Sacilowski, Donna Yanowski, Yvette Darnell** and new member **Mary Nurre**. There were also several Westbury gardeners among us. We were able to harvest all our holy basil, lots of butterfly pea seed pods and, to the surprise of us all, turmeric, lots of it!!! What a fabulous treasure! It is drying now, and we will think about how to best use it.



**Donna Yanowski with turmeric plants**

The time to plant chamomile and calendula is now. Janice Stuff is starting seedlings for Orange King Calendula. We also have Resina Calendula, which is a wonderful combination of yellow and orange. We have two kinds of chamomile, regular German Chamomile and a new Polish variety called Zloty Lan which is larger than the German variety. I also have two kinds of monarda seeds. If you can start a flat of seedlings for us to distribute for planting, let me know.

## WESTBURY COMMUNITY GARDEN WORK DAYS

TWO DAYS TO VOLUNTEER

**Friday and Saturday  
JANUARY 14 & 15 @ 10 AM  
12581 Dunlap Street 77035**

**Fertilizing, aerating, planting seeds and transplants for the spring.  
Whatever needs to be done!  
Come on out and join us!!!**

**Bring a mug. I will bring hot water and we can take a break with some  
fresh herb tea.**

Julie

[Location of Westbury Garden](#)

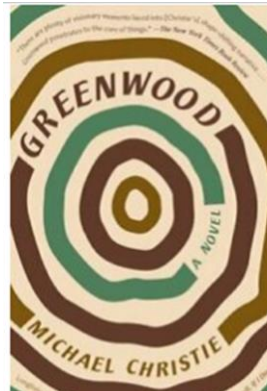


**BOOK  
C  
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If you have suggestions for books or other media members might like, submit your suggestions to Linda Alderman at [ewalderman@comcast.net](mailto:ewalderman@comcast.net)



The HERB SOCIETY of AMERICA  
Booklist Recommendation



**Greenwood** (2020) is a novel by [Michael Christie](#). An ecological catastrophe has led to the destruction of trees...a bleak vision of the future with Steinbeckian cadences



**Calling All  
Speakers**

**Herb Fair Chair**

The South Texas Herb Society is looking for an Herb Fair Chair for the 2022 Fair. If you enjoy working with hard-working, creative fellow members interested in sharing their time, knowledge and talents, you'll enjoy this position. Notebooks and a USB drive, with detailed information regarding the position and responsibilities, are available to assist you.

If interested, contact Julie Fordes at [fordesjulie@gmail.com](mailto:fordesjulie@gmail.com)

Periodically, the South Texas Unit receives requests for a speaker to present at other organizations. If you have a plant that you are passionate about and want to share with others, please let Catherine O'Brien know. Contact her at [Vibrio13@gmail.com](mailto:Vibrio13@gmail.com) or 281-467-1139.

We can help you set up a PowerPoint presentation and teach you how to do voiceovers if you are not comfortable presenting in person. You could join their online meetings or you can present in person. If there is one thing that we've learned from this pandemic, it's that there are multiple ways communicate with other plant lovers other than in person.



## Scenes from the Day Group December Meeting



At left – **Donna Yanowski** holds the day's brunch menu of quiche accompanied by roasted cherry tomatoes prepared by Donna Wheeler's husband, Doug. It was a favorite and is included in the At-Home recipe section. New member, **Mary Nurre** is on the left and **Janice Dana** to the right.

At right – Enjoying the meal: from left to right are **Julie Fordes, Donna Wheeler, Mary Nurre, Janice Stuff, Tamara Gruber** and **Pam Harris**



Left to right: **Yvette Darnell, Lois Jean Howard, Donna Yanowski, Jane Littell** and in the background, **Donna Wheeler**, the busy hostess!

*The South Texas Unit Day Meeting was a holiday gathering at the home of Donna Wheeler on December 14. It was a lively, fun and food-filled event. Beth Murphy received her 40-year member pin and shared what the Herb Society was like when she joined all those years ago. We learned about each other's Holiday traditions and shared a few of our memories followed by brunch and delicious desserts provided by each member.*





**AT-HOME RECIPES**



**AT-HOME  
RECIPES**  
January 2022  
Carolyn Kosclskey

*Happy New Year!--the second new year and the second January in the pandemic...a month for rest and quiet reflection, for staying close to hearth and home and counting blessings. It's a time to welcome in the winter months as we prepare to rest our bodies, nurture our souls, and make gentle plans for the year ahead. A new month, a new year...and every day from now on will be a little bit longer and a little bit lighter than the day before.*

**JANUARY HOLIDAYS**

**1 - New Year's Day**

**6 - Epiphany Day** is a Christian holiday that marks the day that the Three Kings visited Jesus, and is celebrated in Western Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. It is known as the 12th Day of Christmas, as it falls twelve days after Christmas. Some churches celebrate it on the Sunday after January 6

**7 - Orthodox Christmas.** Churches in Russia, Serbia, and other Eastern European countries celebrate Christmas the first day of the new year as per the Julian calendar established by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C., and New Year's a week later on January 14.

**17 - Martin Luther King Day**, celebrating the life and accomplishment of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the third Monday of January. The day became a federally recognized holiday in 1983, although not recognized by all states until 2000.

If the beginning text in italics looks familiar it is, and is from the January 2021 *Herbal Scents* recipe section. As mentioned last year *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (released December 2020) chose the theme "make every bite count" because of the profound effect of what and how much we eat has on our health. Local foods prepared in the comfort and safety of our homes along with produce and herbs from our gardens or local farmers markets continue to be recommended. Travel still continues to be risky. Food waste continues.

**2022 PREDICTED FOOD TRENDS**

Food trends predicted for 2022 focus on our health and environmental sustainability related to climate change. We're familiar with "dairy-free" milks and cheeses, but new vocabulary for the year will include "carbon emissions" in labeling, "microalgae protein," and "plant-based charcuterie boards" which will include "lab-grown meats" along with "plant-based" cheeses.



The topic of “food waste” has been around for several years and U.S. News reports that the carbon footprint of one-third of the food grown and not eaten in the US is a greater carbon footprint than that of the airline industry. All of us can easily address this in our homes by minimizing food waste in the kitchen through creative, nutritious and delicious root-to-tip recipes, mindful meal preparation so as to not waste servings, incorporating leftovers into other recipes or freezing for future meals, and taking an inventory of our pantry and refrigerator before shopping. Eggshells and clippings from vegetables and fruits prepared in our homes can be incorporated into our soil to produce compost.

Immune health will offer a more holistic approach regarding sleep, relaxation, stress reduction and digestive wellness with more foods and beverages fortified with vitamin C, vitamin D, zinc, probiotics, prebiotics and adaptogens (certain herbs and mushrooms thought to have health benefits). The big winner in 2022 will be mushrooms, gaining traction as a superfood ingredient.

With a continued focus on health and nutrient dense foods while *staying close to hearth and home*, two recipes are offered for this month.

### **KALE AND WHITE-BEAN SOUP**

*This Mediterranean diet gluten-free soup is both hearty and light with protein from the turkey and beans, fiber from the beans and vegetables, and plenty of flavor all around!*

#### Ingredients

2 tablespoons canola oil  
1 onion chopped  
1 link mild or hot turkey sausage casing removed  
3 cloves garlic minced  
½ teaspoon chopped fresh thyme or ¼ teaspoon dried  
½ teaspoon fresh chopped rosemary or ¼ teaspoon dried  
4 cups kale stems removed, washed, and shredded (save stems for compost!)  
2 15-ounce cans fire-roasted diced tomatoes with their juice  
2 19-ounce cans cannelloni beans, rinsed and drained  
Salt and pepper to taste

#### Instructions

Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add the onion and sauté about 2 to 3 minutes until softened. Add the sausage and cook, breaking apart, until no longer pink, about 3 to 4 minutes. Add the garlic and kale to the pan and cook, stirring until the kale wilts, about 2 minutes. Stir in the tomatoes; bring to a simmer. Reduce the heat and simmer, covered, until the kale is tender, about 4 to 5 minutes. Stir the beans into the stew and cook until warmed through, about 5 minutes. For a thicker consistency, mash some of the beans with a fork or back of a spoon. Taste, add salt and pepper if necessary, and serve. Garnish with fresh parsley.

*From the kitchen of Donna Wheeler.* I've added and included herbs in this recipe. Have fun adding or altering using your own favorites.

Adapted from [www.foodandwine.com/recipes/kale-and-white-bean-stew](http://www.foodandwine.com/recipes/kale-and-white-bean-stew)





In December the day group was invited to a holiday party at the home of Donna Wheeler. Lunch consisted of a spinach salad and a delicious quiche Lorraine made by Donna, accompanied with roasted red cherry tomatoes made by husband Doug.

## ROASTED RED CHERRY TOMATOES ON THE VINE

*What's more appealing than eating those dead-of-winter, out of season red fruits!*

### Ingredients

3-4 pounds of cherry tomatoes on the vine (sometimes called "Sugar Bombs")

Flaky finishing salt, kosher salt, or sea salt

Quality olive oil or olive oil cooking spray

Herbs of choice (optional) – fresh basil, thyme or oregano

### Instructions

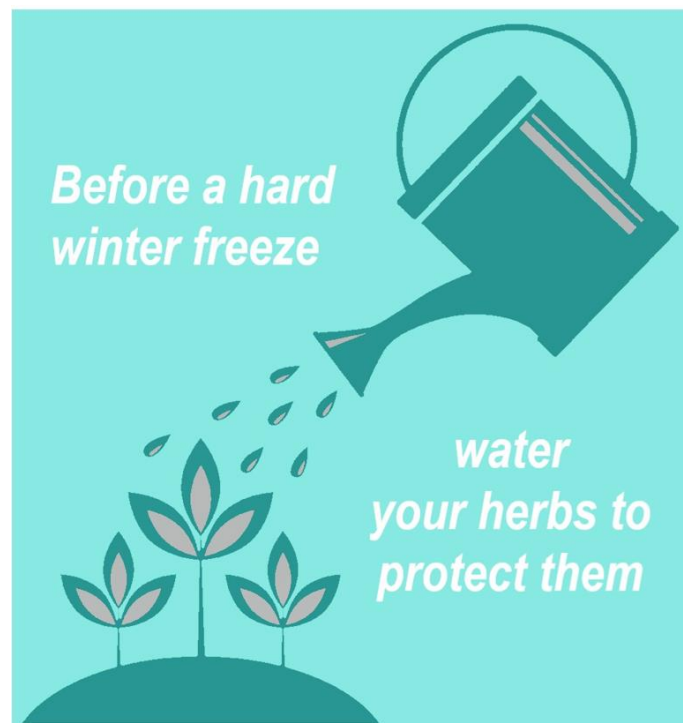
Being careful to retain the fruit on the stems, rinse and blot dry stem tomatoes on a parchment paper lined cooking sheet. Lightly coat the tomatoes with olive oil using a brush, or with olive oil cooking spray. Place tray in a preheated 350 degree for 15-20 minutes. Remove from oven and sprinkle with salt and herbs of choice. Serve warm.

*Submitted by Doug Wheeler, husband of Donna.*

**Dietary Guidelines for Americans:** [www.dietaryguidelines.gov/](http://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/)

**Top Food Trends for 2022:** <https://health.usnews.com/health-news/blogs/eat-run/slideshows/top-food-trends-for-2022>

**The February At-Home Recipe section will feature recipes that would be appropriate for celebrating Valentine's Day or Lincoln's or Washington's birthdays. Members having a February birthday will be invited to submit a recipe, along with recipes from other members and readers.**





# THE GIFT OF THE MAGI - The Holy Tears of Frankincense

Karen Cottingham



**A treasure for all times - the aromatic frankincense "tears" presented to the Christ child by the Wise Men from the East are sorted today by Samburu women in Kenya. The "Three Wise Men" lithographic print from 1900 was designed by J. C. Leyendecker.**

\*1-3

The "Twelve Days of Christmas" are those special days between Christmas Day, the Christian celebration of the birth of Christ, and Epiphany, the commemoration of the arrival of the Magi from the East. Led to Bethlehem by a star, the sages from far-off lands proclaimed the holy infant the prophesied King of the Jews. Reverently, we are told, "they fell down, and worshipped him; and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh." (Matthew 2: 10–11 KJV)



“Gold, frankincense, and myrrh” - these fabled offerings would have been exotic, emblematic, and immensely valuable gifts befitting a newborn king. Whether they were chosen for their symbolic, or for their practical worth, we can only wonder.



**The now faded 3rd century fresco, the 'Adoration of the Magi', in the Catacombs of Priscilla, an underground burial chamber in Rome. \*4**

unimaginable wealth associated with its harvest, this golden resin quite literally changed the course of human history and structured the ancient world. The “tears of the gods,” as frankincense is sometimes called, were instrumental in establishing worldwide trade relations, power, and wealth. Fabulous cities and immense fleets of ships were financed by the fragrant gum.

In the imagination of the ancients, frankincense twigs formed the flaming nest of the mythical phoenix and the sacred trees were guarded by flying serpents.

Even today, the scrubby, dwarfed trees emerging from solid rock in the searing heat of the desert are believed to have supernatural powers.

While not exactly “supernatural”, the pungent and earthy aroma of frankincense does have the effect of elevating the mood, generating happiness and a sense of harmony and well-being. Ironically, the uplifting “tears” of resin are the tree’s response to injury, whether the

Gold, of course, signified the wealth, power, and authority of royalty, but also embellished holy images and objects. Frankincense, burned on sacred altars and carrying prayers to the gods on its fragrant smoke, was also used medicinally and to mend broken pots. And myrrh, a soothing salve for the wounds and sores of everyday life, foretold of the myrrh-bearing women who brought funeral spices and ointment to Christ’s tomb. Epiphany, also called “The Feast of the Three Kings”, is celebrated on January 6. I hope that before then you take the time to learn about the

Magi’s precious gift of frankincense. Prized for its medicinal qualities, its sublime fragrance, and the



**The precious gum-bearing frankincense trees were said to be guarded by fierce red snakes which leap into the air to inflict fatal bites on any intruder. Koninklijke Bibliotheek, KB, KA 16 Folio 124v S. \*5**





grazing camel, the relentless wind, or the knife of the harvester. Botanical science and biblical symbolism converge in shared themes of injury, wounds, and suffering throughout all aspects of the frankincense story.

And, after five thousand years of careful stewardship, poverty and brutal over harvesting threatens the future of this legendary gift of the magi.

The appreciation and ritual use of frankincense began long before the quest of the magi. Material on an Iron Age altar at the entrance to the 'Holy of Holies' of a shrine in modern-day Israel was recently identified as cannabis and frankincense.

The frankincense would have been imported from the Dhofar Mountain range in southern Oman.

Oman is located on the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, and was the center of early frankincense harvesting and trade.

As for most plants of value, legends tell of how the frankincense tree came into existence. This is how it is told in Dhofar:



**A single frankincense tree, *Boswellia sacra*, in a dry valley on the Yemeni border high above Oman's coast. The sap of this tree is the most used resin in all of history for purification, protection, consecration, and healing. \*6**

A girl from jinn [beings that are concealed from the senses] fell in love with a human boy. Since this love was a violation of the jinn rules, they decided to punish her and transform her into something else. She cried for a long time and after they insisted that she must be punished, she chose to become a tree.

Thousands of years passed by and this silent and hurt tree that's called frankincense continued to shed tears in the form of resin that solidified into white particles which smell of musk. It is therefore a girl in the shape of a tree weeping over her beloved.

Crystal tears that taste of grief came out of the trunk and people scattered them on burning coal to turn it into pure smoke with a scent that heals the sick and with a bitter taste that grieves for lost love. A beautiful tree, which suffered as a result of love, heroically produced a material that healed people. Isn't it love that we seek from each other?

~ "Oman: Mythology, history and use of Frankincense or Hojari"

I can't help but marvel that the legend from ancient Arabia of "A beautiful tree, which suffered as a result of love, heroically produced a material that healed people" so beautifully mirrors the message of Christmas.

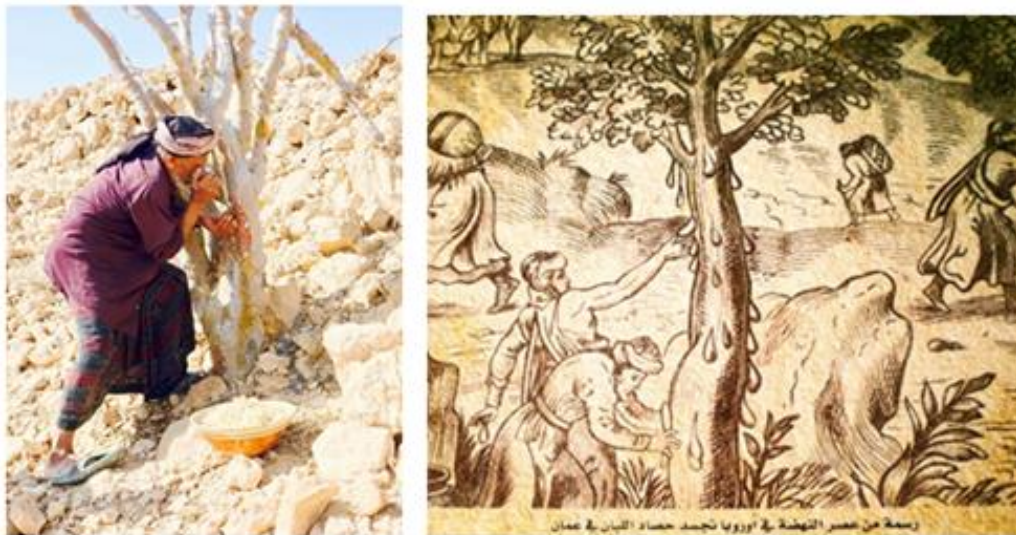
*Boswellia sacra*, the source of the Biblical frankincense, is the tree "that weeps when wounded" (**Gary Paul Nabhan**, "Aromas Emanating from the Driest of Places"). Frankincense, he explains, "is derived from a syrupy latex that does not become accessible unless the small tree is wounded by weather or livestock, or



intentionally scored by harvesters. The slow flowing latex begins to dry into gummy resin below the wound on its bark, and then hardens into amber droplets the size of tears.”



The Greek and Latin words for frankincense, *libanos*, *libanus* and *olibanum*, come from the Arabic *lubān*, for “milky whiteness”. Once exposed to air and sun, the frankincense dries to tear-shaped droplets of silver, golden, or amber that are collected by harvesters. \*7-8



A European Renaissance depiction of frankincense harvest in Arabia next to a contemporary harvester in Oman. The engraving illustrates the text of *Universal Cosmography* written in 1575 by the French monk Andre Thevet. \*9-10

In response to an injury to the bark, trees of the Burseraceae family, such as frankincense and myrrh, secrete a sticky resinous material which seals the wound, prevents water loss, and protects the plant from insect damage and infections. These resins are critical for the tree’s survival, as insects and microscopic pathogens are flushed out, trapped in the “tears”, or destroyed by the toxic compounds in the resin. Volatile oils may also have antiseptic properties or may attract benefactors such as parasitoids or predators of the herbivores that attack the plant.



The volatile oils produced by frankincense trees struggling to survive in a harsh terrain also happen to emit hauntingly enticing fragrances. The scorching desert air is so redolent of the resin's sublime perfume that the Greek historian **Herodotus** (484-425 BCE) reported "The whole country is scented with them - and exhales an odor marvelously sweet."

However this fragrance is described - woody, lemony, or earthy; balsamic, spicy, or piney - people all over the ancient world recognized it as sacred. Vast quantities of frankincense resin were burned annually throughout the Mediterranean and Near East as ritual offerings to the gods. And to meet the demand, workers learned to mimic the natural process of resin flow by slashing and bleeding the bark of *Boswellia* and then later collecting the "tears".



**Frankincense tears smoldering in an Omani incense burner of ancient design. \*11-12**

The Egyptians were among the earliest and heaviest users of frankincense, particularly in their mortuary rituals and ceremonial purifications. When **Howard Carter** famously opened the tomb of **Pharaoh Tutankhamun**, the 3,000-year-old burial chamber contained pellets of powdered frankincense and jars of still-fragrant frankincense-spiked perfume oil.

In the Temple of Baal, Babylonian priests burned two and a half tons of frankincense each year.

**Pliny** recorded that **Nero** burnt an entire year's production of Arabian frankincense at the funeral of his wife **Poppaea**.

Frankincense was also a key part of the sacrifices to *Yahweh* in Old Testament worship. In *Exodus*, the Lord said to Moses:

Gather fragrant spices—resin droplets, mollusk shell, and galbanum—and mix these fragrant spices with pure frankincense, weighed out in equal amounts. Using the usual techniques of the incense maker, blend the spices together and sprinkle them with salt to produce a pure and holy incense. Grind some of the mixture into a very fine powder and put it in front of the Ark of the Covenant, where I will meet with you in the Tabernacle. You must treat this incense as most holy. Never use this formula to make this incense for yourselves. It is reserved for the Lord, and you must treat it as holy. Anyone who makes incense like this for personal use will be cut off from the community.

~ Exodus 30:34–38, NLT



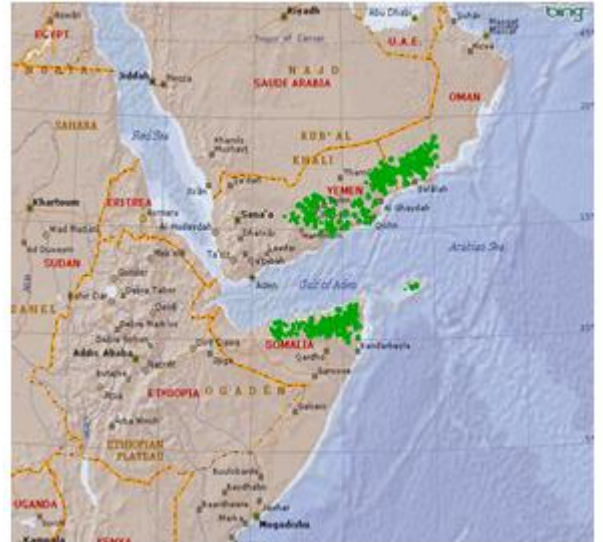


At the peak of the incense trade, 3,000 tons of frankincense resin were conveyed annually by boat or camel caravan to meet the insatiable demand of the ancients.

The trees that supplied this treasure were the *Boswellia sacra*, which grew only on the rocky, heat-blasted slopes and ravines of the southern Arabian peninsula and the Horn of Africa.

The overland route, known as the Incense Road, was actually a network of meandering paths spanning the more than 1,200 miles between southern Arabia and the Mediterranean port of Gaza. In constant danger from sandstorms and thieves, traders guided their heavily loaded camels through the harsh, barren environment. Navigating by the stars, these early merchants accomplished the arduous journey in about 62 days.

Stopping points sprang up along the way, with around 65 towns, cities, or oases where traders and their camel caravans could rest, restock with supplies and water, and sell their goods. Generally, a day's worth of travel would bring the caravans to the next stop.



**Distribution of *Boswellia sacra* in the ancient world. \*13**



**Ruins of the Saharonim caravansary in the Negev desert. \*14**

Eventually, the incense merchants also brought gold, ivory, pearls, precious stones, feathers, ebony and textiles from Africa, India, and the Far East to Mediterranean and Persian markets. These coveted commodities supported a major international trade giving rise to numerous prosperous civilizations.

Even the settlements along the route became fabulously wealthy due to the "safe passage" tariffs levied at each stop along the way."

Around the last century BCE, the overland incense transfer transitioned to safer maritime routes crossing the Red Sea and the unforgiving desert sands buried much of the abandoned Incense Road.

Eventually, the frankincense trade almost completely collapsed, since Christians, who increasingly dominated Roman society, considered incense-burning idolatrous. As **Athenagoras**, the Christian apologist (133 CE-190 CE) explained, "The creator and father of the universe does not require blood, nor smoke, nor even the sweet smell of flowers and incense."



Strict laws, enacted in the year 392 by the Eastern Roman Emperor **Theodosius II**, made sacrifice and divination treasonable and punishable with death. Moreover, “the use of lights, incense, garlands and libations was to involve the forfeiture of house and land where they were used; and all who entered heathen temples were to be fined.”

And so it became idolatrous, and illegal, to worship with frankincense, the sacred gift of the magi.

Nevertheless, the hunger for frankincense never completely disappeared. Incense was gradually reintroduced into Catholic liturgy, particularly in the Eastern branch of the Church. Crusaders returning with frankincense in the eleventh century provided a reliable supply of the precious resin that had been difficult to obtain after the collapse of the earlier trade networks.



**Angels Swinging Censers, late 1400s, by Gherardo di Giovanni del Flora (1445-1497) and a 13th century reliquary chest at the Eglise Notre-Dame de Cunault. \*15-16**

The “Cult of the Magi” had also taken hold by the early Middle Ages. In folklore and in official Church teachings, the wise men who were not otherwise described in the Bible developed distinct characteristics. Presumably because of the three famous gifts, a common perception of just three foreign dignitaries arose. Names and nationalities were created for the trio - **Melchior**, king of Arabia; **Caspar**, king of Tarsus (located in southern Turkey); and **Balthasar**, king of either Ethiopia or Saba, in modern-day Yemen.

As embellishments proliferated, Melchior became an elderly, light-complexioned man with white hair and beard bearing the gift of gold. Caspar, a young and beardless man of “ruddy” complexion, offered frankincense, and Balthasar, a middle-aged African man, brought the infant Jesus a gift of myrrh.

Artists often depicted the magi as rulers from each of the known three continents, Europe, Asia, and Africa, emphasizing the belief in the global reach of Christianity. Theatrical pageants reenacted the quest of the magi in spectacular fashion, and the discovery of the embalmed bodies of three men, one young, one middle-aged, and one old, said to be preserved as they had been during that holy encounter, firmly entrenched the fabricated narrative in medieval hearts and minds.





**Adoration of the Magi, by Gentile da Fabriano, c. 1423. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy. \*17**



**A censer is waved at a church service in Fulda, Germany, and Tawadros II, Pope of the Coptic Orthodox church of Alexandria, celebrates Mass. \*18-19**



In religious ceremonies, frankincense is used today to create a sacred space and a euphoric state of mind conducive to worship. Symbolically, the smoke that rises as the resin burns connects earth to heaven.

In many cultures the fragrance of smoldering frankincense is believed to increase one's spiritual connection and intuition. The Chinese name for frankincense, "*fanhunxiang*", meaning "calling back the soul fragrance" is particularly evocative of peace and presence.

Frankincense is also used in meditation, since the scent is calming, grounding and pleasant to the senses.

Despite being used for millennia for spiritual purposes, scientists have only recently begun examining frankincense for possible psychoactive properties. An international team of scientists, including researchers from Johns Hopkins University and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, describe how incensole acetate, a compound isolated from frankincense, reduces depression and anxiety in mice. The



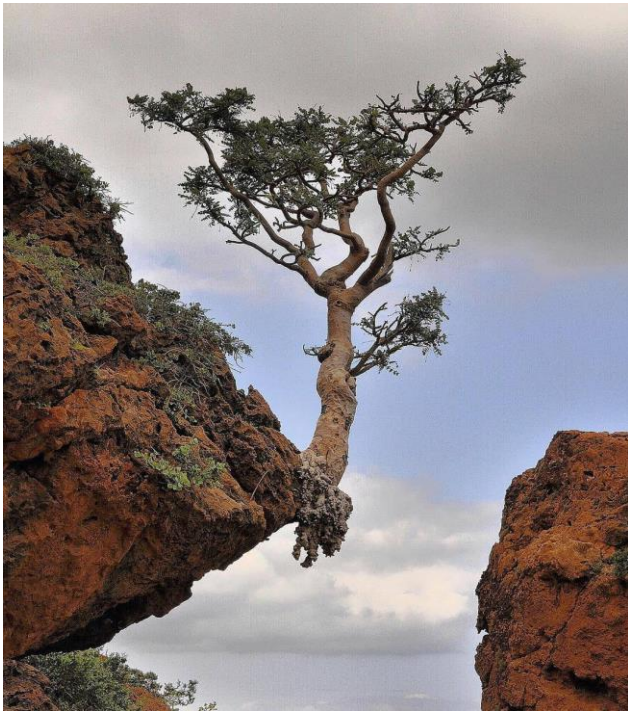


researchers also discovered that incensole activates TRPV3 ion channels in the brain. These channels have been extensively studied in the skin, where their activation is associated with the perception of warmth, but are not well understood in the brain. Scientists suspect they may play a role in emotional regulation, which may provide a biological basis for the deeply rooted cultural and religious traditions involving frankincense.

We frequently dismiss practices from other cultures as quaint and superstitious without giving them serious consideration. A good example is the practice of pregnant *Bedu* women (members of various nomadic Arab tribes) of chewing frankincense gum to encourage the unborn children in their wombs to live an intellectually and spiritually elevated life. Imagine my surprise to learn of a study of rats whose mothers were fed *Boswellia* during gestation. Tests of learning and memory showed significant benefits to the rats exposed to frankincense.

And finally, boswellic acids from frankincense have been shown to inhibit the production of leukotriene, an inflammatory molecule associated with conditions like arthritis, asthma, and painful bowel disorders.

Researchers are even studying boswellic acids as potential medical interventions for COVID-19.



**Boswellia sacra tree growing at the very edge of a rocky cliff (photographer unknown). \*20**

Unfortunately, with the increasing demand for frankincense for medicinal, cosmetic, aromatherapeutic, and spiritual use, coupled with socioeconomic instability and violent conflicts in the growing areas, all of the major species of *Boswellia* are now in precarious positions. Ten species are currently on the Red List of Threatened Species, and in Ethiopia, the largest exporter of frankincense in the world, it is predicted that the *Boswellia* tree will be almost completely gone within the next three decades.

Some harvesting locations have trees bearing over 100 cuts, creating a non-survivable situation for the over-exploited tree. The injured trees literally “bleed to death”, succumb to insects or infection, or are so depleted that they can no longer reproduce. Heavily tapped trees produce seeds that germinate at only 16% while seeds of trees that had not been tapped germinate at more than 80%.

Trees are also threatened by overgrazing of livestock, fires, and conversion of frankincense woodlands to agriculture.

Traditional harvesters, believing trees were sacred and supernaturally powerful, worked under ritualistic constraints which insured the survival of both the trees and the harvesters. Sadly, sustainable practices once followed by generation after generation stewarding the same family plot have been replaced by land ownership by exporters and harvesting by impoverished migrants, frequently trespassing, and incentivized to extract as much resin as possible.



Ali Salem Bait Said, an Omani forest steward, explains:

In the past, (my) people thought of themselves as friends of the tree. They don't scratch down to the bone. They go and cut closer to the bark - not deep - so that they will not hurt the tree. Now (with the suspension of traditional ownership) there is no one to take care of the trees. And so there are people who come here that think of them as wild (not managed) and milk them for all they can give, until the trees dry up. (Those migrant harvesters) may not even know the traditional songs for *lubān* (frankincense), the ones we sang in celebration of God.

~ Gary Paul Nabhan, "Aromas Emanating from the Driest of Places"

Frankincense trees are weeping with holy tears.

If you are inspired to purchase a frankincense product - whether incense, face cream, or a remedy for arthritis, please make sure it is harvested sustainably, and with the reverence and respect befitting the ancient gift of the magi.

*\*Image Credits:*

1. Frankincense tear from [https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/1455/1748/products/Frankincense\\_Serrata\\_PLANT3\\_1024x1024.jpg?v=1538351875](https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/1455/1748/products/Frankincense_Serrata_PLANT3_1024x1024.jpg?v=1538351875) photographer not identified
2. "Three Wise Men" lithograph from <https://www.pinterest.com/gothicunicorn7/jc-leyendecker-art/>
3. Women sorting frankincense from <https://apothecarysgarden.com/tag/frankincense/>, photographer not identified
4. "Adoration of the Magi", Roman catacomb, from <https://www.thecultureconcept.com/epiphany-gold-frankincense-myrrh-three-wise-men-or-kings>, photographer not identified
5. Flying serpent from <http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast273.htm>
6. Frankincense tree from <https://www.martinhespfoodandtravel.com/hespfoodandtravelhome/the-christmas-story-that-is-frankincense>, photographer not identified
7. Frankincense latex droplets from <https://ayublab.com/frankincense>, photographer not identified
8. Amber tears from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/gardeningpicturegalleries/8186236/The-beauty-of-tree-bark-captured-on-camera-by-Cedric-Pollet.html?image=11>, photographer Cedric Pollet
9. Man harvesting frankincense from <https://ayublab.com/frankincense>, photographer not identified
10. Engraving from <https://ayublab.com/frankincense>
11. Frankincense tear from <https://ayublab.com/frankincense>, photographer not identified
12. Smouldering frankincense from <https://www.audleytravel.com/oman/places-to-go/dhofar/salalah>, photographer not identified
13. Map of Boswellia distribution from <https://theflowingpoet.wordpress.com/2013/10/02/frankincense-other-stuff-about-oman-excerpted-from-the-traz-world-factbook/>
14. Ruins of the Saharonim caravansary <https://brewminate.com/exploring-the-ruins-of-an-ancient-incense-route/>, photographer not identified
15. Angels Swinging Censers from <https://emuseum.ringling.org/emuseum/objects/27446/angels-swinging-censers>
16. Reliquary chest from <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/44613852535486027/>
17. "Adoration of the Magi" from <https://smarthistory.org/gentile-da-fabriano-adoration-magi-reframed/>
18. Censing in German church service from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/oct/02/church-incense-not-included-psychoactive-substances-bill-home-office>
19. Censing in Coptic Orthodox Church from <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/coptic-martyrs-inspire-joy-and-pride-in-egypt-tp0st0r6j>
20. Frankincense tree from [https://www.reddit.com/r/NatureIsFuckingLit/comments/g4d40/a\\_boswellia\\_sacra\\_tree\\_growing\\_on\\_the\\_edge\\_of\\_a/](https://www.reddit.com/r/NatureIsFuckingLit/comments/g4d40/a_boswellia_sacra_tree_growing_on_the_edge_of_a/) photographer unknown

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The Herb Society of America  
South Texas Unit  
P.O. Box 6515  
Houston, TX 77265-6515

Find our Unit on the web at:  
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