
Perfumery Plant Materials

As Reflected In Early Persian Poetry¹

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Sweet smelling plant materials have attracted human attention since ancient times.² It was realised that some plant materials have a better aroma when placed on burning firewood, which is how rituals all over the world came to include both plants and incense. The ceremonial feeding of the perpetual fire in Zoroastrian fire temples, performed five times in 24 hours, is called *būy* (aroma). The ancient Iranian scriptures – the Avesta and scriptures written in Pahlavi – all mention aromatics and several kinds of incense.

The purpose of this contribution is to explain the nature and utilisation of plants used as bases in perfumes. The habitat and botanical characteristics of major perfumery plants and their common names in a few languages are presented. These plants include agarwood, balsam, camphor, frankincense, moringa, myrrh, rose, saffron, sandalwood and wild rue. Examples of early Persian poetry will show the similes and metaphors that these materials represent and may indicate the ritual use of these plant species.

Agarwood or Aloewood

Botanical name: *Aquilaria malaccensis*, *A. agallocha* (Family: *Thymelaeaceae*); English: agarwood, aloewood, agar; German: Adlerholzbaum; French: bois d'aigle, bois d'aloès; Arabic: عود (*ūd* = wood); Persian: عود (*ūd*).

This big, tall evergreen tree is native to India and China. The tree may become infected with a fungus, *Phialophora parasitica*, and will then produce an aromatic resin in response to the attack. This resin is high in volatile organic compounds, known as terpens, that aid in suppressing or delaying the fungal growth. While the unaffected wood of the tree is relatively light in colour, the resin increases the mass and density of the affected wood, changing its light colour to dark brown or black. This dark, aromatic, resin-embedded heartwood, known as agarwood or aloewood or *ūd*, is the most expensive wood in the world for its distinctive fragrance. This wood is used as incense, and its essential oil is primarily used in top quality perfumes.

The fungus may naturally infect a small portion of the trees. Therefore, it is common practice to inoculate new plantations with the fungus. While the resin of a tree produced

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²The transliteration of Persian words in this article follows the rules of the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft.

The English translations of all Persian poems are by the author.

from natural infection is commonly known as agar No. 1, the inferior resin produced by artificial infection is of lower quality and is called agar No. 2. Agarwood is relatively rare because of the depletion of this wild resource. This species is currently on the endangered list.

As a defensive process, the agarwood tree develops nodes on branches. These nodes contain resins that generate incense, *'ūd*, upon burning. This resin is valuable and used in perfumes. Burning nodes of *'ūd* has been a metaphor for getting over the complexity of love:

گر عود کند گره‌نمایی
 تو نافه شو از گره‌کشایی
 If the *'ūd* tree displays nodes,
 You open up your musk sac.
 [If you face problems, you had better be the solution.]

Nezāmī Gangavī³, 1141–1209

عقده‌های مشکلم چون عود یکسر باز شد
 تا فتادم در حریم دلگشای سوختن
 All my nodes were opened like *'ūd*,
 As I began to burn in love.

Şā'eb⁴, 1607–1670

تا عشق تو سوخت همچو عودم
 یک عقده نماند از وجودم
 I was burned down like *'ūd* by your love,
 Not even a node or a complex remained in me.

Rūmī⁵, 1207–1273

سر تا به پای عود گره بود بند بند
 اندر گشایش عدم آن عقده‌ها گشود
 The *'ūd* was nodular all over and full of complexes,
 To open its way to annihilation, it opened all its complexes.

Rūmī, 1207–1273

The ancient Chinese believed that burying pieces of agarwood tree in damp sand would make the woody part decompose and separate from the heartwood agar. This belief is reflected in Persian poetry:

نه عود گردد هر چوب کان به جهد و به رنج
 به گل فروکنی اندر کنار دریا بار
 Not every kind of wood may become *'ūd*,
 Even if you bury it under beach sand.
 [Not everyone is capable of change.]

Farroḥī Sīstānī⁶, d. 1038

A blend of agarwood and sugar makes the incense stick burn longer. The odour of caramel adds to the fragrance:

به سر تربت مجنون چو بسوزید عبیر
 شکر و عود ز خال و لب لیلی طلبید

³ *Ḥamsa of Nezāmī*, ed. Sāmīyeh Bašīr Moždehī, Bahā'eddīn Ḥorramšāhī, Vaḥīd Dastğerdī, (Tehran, 2004).

⁴ *Dīvān-e Şā'eb Tabrīzī*, ed. M. Qahramān, (Tehran, 1991).

⁵ *Dīvān-e Šams*, (ed.) Badī'–al–Zamān Forūzānfar and Ġā'far Šahīdī, 8 volumes, (Tehran, 2003).

⁶ *Dīvān-e Farroḥī Sīstānī*, (ed.) M. Dabīr–Sīyāqī, (Tehran, 1992).

If you want to burn incense on Mağnūn's grave,
Get the sugar and 'ūd from Leylī's lips and mole.

Kamāl Hoğandī⁷, 1320–1401

پیش صدر مصطفیٰ بین ہم بلال و ہم صہیب
این چو عود آن چون شکر در عود سوزان آمدہ

Both faithful believers, black Balāl and white Şohayb, devoted to the prophet, Like burning
agarwood and sugar to spread the fragrance of the faith.

Hāqānī⁸, 1126–1199

Ashes of 'ūd were used for whitening the teeth:

پاک طبیعت می رساند فیض بعد از سوختن
عود خاکستر چو گردد می کند دندان سفید

The one with pure nature benefits others, even after death,
'Ūd whitens the teeth after it burns to ashes.

Şā'eb, 1607–1670

مشرق به عود سوخته دندان سپید کرد

The east whitened the teeth by the burnt 'ūd . . .
[The dawn cracked, as the night was over . . .]

Hāqānī, 1126–1199

Balsam

Botanical name: *Commiphora opobalsamum*, *C. meccanensis* (Family: *Burseraceae*); English: balsam tree, balsam of Mecca, balm of Gilead; German: Balsambaum, Balsamstrauch; French: balsamier, arbre du baume; Arabic: بَلْسَان (*balasān*); Persian: بَلْسَان (*balasān*).

This tree is native to the Red Sea region, i.e. to Egypt and Israel. The name balm of Gilead refers to a mountain region east of the Jordan River: a hill of testimony or mound of witness. From the bark of this rare and small tree, an aromatic, oily and resinous substance flows or trickles when an incision is made through the bark. The fragrant resin, known as balsam, is used for incense and perfume. The species name, *opobalsamum*, means 'superb oil' in Hebrew. The resin was valued as perfume in ancient Greece, the Roman Empire and Parthia. The perfume is still made in Egypt for noblewomen.

According to Easton's Bible Dictionary, the word 'balsam' does not occur in the Bible. However, its contracted form, balm, "occurs in the Authorized Version (Genesis 37: 25; 43: 11; Jeremiah 8: 22; 46: 11; 51: 8; Ezek 27: 17) as the rendering of the Hebrew word *tsori* or *tsri*, which denotes the gum of a [very precious] tree growing in Gilead [. . . . It] was celebrated for its medicinal qualities and [. . .] circulated as an article of merchandise by Arab and Phoenician merchants. The shrub so named was highly valued, and was almost peculiar to Palestine. In the time of Josephus, it was cultivated in the neighbourhood of Jericho and the Dead Sea. [. . . It is believed] that the tree yielding this balm was brought by the queen of Sheba as a present to Solomon, and that he planted it in his gardens at Jericho".⁹

⁷ *Dīvān-e Kamāl Hoğandī*, (ed.) 'Azīz Dawlatābādī, Vezārat-e Farhang va Eršād-e Islāmī, Tabrīz, (Tabrīz, 1996).

⁸ *Dīvān-e Hāqānī Šervānī*, (ed.) Žiā' -al-Dīn Sağğādī, (Tehran, 1994).

⁹ 'Balm', Net Bible, Biblical Studies Press 1996–2009, <<http://classic.net.bible.org/dictionary.php?word=Balm>> (accessed 2012-07-10).

The word *balasān* sounds like *bā lasān* (Arabic, used in Persian), meaning ‘with tongue’:

به لسانش نگر که چون بلسان
روغن دیرباب می چکدش
See her tongue, like *balasān*,
The rare, sweet oil drips from it.
[She is a sweet talker.]

Hāqānī, 1126–1199

بلسان مصر خواهی به لسان من نظر کن
چه عجب حدیث شیرین ز چنین رطب لسانی
If you want Egyptian *balasān*, look at my tongue,
What a sweet talk from this sweet tongue!

Nezāmī Ganjavī, 1141–1209

Camphor

Botanical name: *Cinnamomum camphora*. *L. camphora* (Family: *Lauraceae*); English: camphor; German: Kampherbaum; French: camphre; Arabic: کافور (*kāfir*); Persian: کافور (*kāfir*).

This large, evergreen tree is native to East Asia, from India to Japan. Camphor refers to the white, granular crystal produced through the refinement of any part of the plant. It is isolated by passing steam through the pulverised wood and by then condensing the vapours. Camphor crystallises from the oily portion of the distillate and is purified by pressing and sublimation. The strong smelling, volatile essential oil has been used from ancient times as an aromatic with antiseptic properties. Camphor is a component of almost all natural perfumes and, blended with wax, makes candles burn with a sweet smell. The earliest mention of camphor in Persia is in the Pahlavi texts in a category of fragrant plants that also includes sandalwood, frankincense, and cardamom.

Šāh-nāma of Ferdowsī (941–1020), an important source of information about fragrant plants and perfume in pre-Islamic Persia, often refers to various aromatics, such as ben, musk, agarwood, ambergris, rosewater and camphor. As a rare, precious exotic substance, camphor was among the gifts given by the emperor of China to Alexander and by the king of India to King Anūšīravān of Persia.¹⁰

بگسترد کافور بر جای خواب
همی ریخت بر چوب صندل گلاب

Manīža scatters camphor on the bed she is preparing for her sweetheart Bīžan and sprinkles rosewater around the bed made of sandalwood.

Šāh-nāma; Bīžan and Manīža, 3/ 213

The corpses of privileged people were superficially embalmed with camphor. The funerary practices of the Sassanids, the last Persian dynasty before the Arab invasion, influenced the

¹⁰ Abu'l-Qāsem Ferdowsī (941–1020 CE), *The Šāh-nāma* (The Book of Kings), (ed.) Ġālāl Hāleqī-Motlaq, 8 volumes, in Persian, (New York, 2008). This book contains the traditional history of ancient Iran, its myths and legends, its tales of kings and noble warriors, and an almost factual history of the Sassanid dynasty (226–650 CE). *Šāh-nāma* mentions agarwood, camphor, rosewater and saffron each about 30 to 60 times, and musk over 250 times. In this article, below each line of poetry from this book, the single digit on the left refers to the volume and the number on the right to the line within the named story. For example, “Ġamšīd, 1/ 42” indicates volume 1, line 42 in Ġamšīd story.

use of camphor in both the Islamic ablution of the dead and the Imami *ḥanūfī*. When the Arabs entered Ctesiphon in 637, they found a lot of camphor, which they took for salt until they used it in bread and discovered its bitterness.¹¹ Camphor plays an important part in the Islamic funerary ritual. Washing the corpse with camphorated water is one of the three obligatory ablutions for the Imami Muslims. This is performed by rubbing pulverised, fresh camphor on seven parts of the body that touch the ground at pray (the forehead, the palms, the knees and the two big toes), without using any other aromatics.

تن شاهوارش بیاراستند
گُل و مشک و کافور و می خواستند
They prepared his [Sīyāvoš's] body for embalming,
They asked for rose, musk, camphor and wine.

Šāh-nāma; Ferūd Sīyāvoš, 3/ 519

تنش زیر کافور شد ناپدید
و زان پس کسی روی دارا ندید
They covered all of his [Dārā's] body with camphor,
Thereafter, nobody ever saw him [he was buried].

Šāh-nāma; Dārā, 5/ 392

Šīrīn had camphor on her dress, before she took her life with poison on Ḥosrow's grave.

نشسته بر شاه، پوشیده روی
به تن بر یکی جامه کافور بوی

Šāh-nāma; Šīrūya, 8/ 606

پراگنده کافور بر خویشتن
چنان چون بود رسم و ساز کفن
He had spread camphor all over himself,
As it was the tradition to be ready to die in a fight.

Šāh-nāma; Šīrūya, 2/ 488

Camphor is mentioned in the Koran (76: 5) as a mixer in a cup from which the righteous shall drink in Paradise. Generally regarded as 'cold' and 'dry', camphor is useful in all 'hot' ailments, lowering fever, and beneficial to people with 'hot' temperaments, often mixed with rosewater for moderation.

من دلی دارم ز عشقش گرم و بیش او شوم
تا مگر بنشانند این گرمی به کافور و گلاب
I go to her with a warm heart of love,
Hope she cools me off by camphor and rosewater.
[White camphor and fragrant rosewater are metaphors for face and kiss.]

Amīr Mo'ezzī¹², d. ca 1126

In early Persian poetry, camphor is often a symbol of whiteness, especially in similes involving white hair as a sign of old age in contrast to musk for dark hair:

مرا سال بر پنجه و یک رسید
ز کافور شد مشک و گل ناپدید

¹¹A. Bal'amī, *Tārīḥ-nāma-ye Tabarī*, (ed.) M. Rowšan, I, (Tehran, 1366 Š./ 1987–88). p. 466.

¹²*Dīvān-e Amīr Mo'ezzī*, (ed.) Nāṣer Hīrī, (Tehran, 1983).

Now I am fifty-one years old,
 Musk turned into camphor and rose disappeared.
 [My dark hair turned grey, and I lost the freshness.]

Šāh-nāma; Ardašīr, 6/ 84

Frankincense

Botanical name: *Boswellia caraterii*, *B. sacra* (Family: *Burseraceae*); English: frankincense, incense tree; German: Weihrauchbaum; French: arbre à l'encens; Arabic: لَبَان (*lubān*); Persian: کُندَر (*kondor*).

This is a small deciduous tree with one or more trunks. Its bark has the texture of paper and can be removed easily. The trees start producing resin at 8 to 10 years of age. The resin is extracted by making a small, shallow incision on the trunk or branches or by removing a portion of the crust. The resin is drained as a milky substance that coagulates in contact with air and is collected by hand. Frankincense tree populations are declining due to over exploitation.

Several species of genus *Boswellia* produce a fragrant resin that is known as frankincense. Of these, *Boswellia sacra*, native to the southern Arabian Peninsula (Yemen and Oman) is the primary species that produces expensive, high quality frankincense with a distinct smell. More specifically, the large, white clumps of frankincense from the Nejd region of Oman are believed to be superior to all other types. The Biblical incense frankincense is also an extract of this species.

These resins have many pharmacological uses, particularly as an anti-inflammatory for joint pain and arthritis. Avicenna mentioned its cooling effects as a remedy for infections and increased body temperature. It is also used for medicinal fumigation. It is believed that burning frankincense resin helps alleviate anxiety and depression. Dioscorides described how the bark of the tree, once put into water, attracted fish into nets. In ancient Egypt, the resin was an ingredient used for embalming their dead.

Frankincense is a cherished gift of nature. Its pure resin has been used in India and Iran to make precious oils for perfume and incense in religious rites. The ancient Persian Pāzand (Avesta) and the Pahlavi scriptures refer to frankincense, respectively, as *kendri* and *kūndūr*, similar to *kondor* in modern Persian.¹³

According to Easton's Bible Dictionary, frankincense is "an odorous resin imported from Arabia (Isaiah 60: 6; Jeremiah 6: 20), yet also growing in Palestine (Canticle 4: 14). It was one of the ingredients in the perfume of the sanctuary (Exodus 30: 34), and was used as an accompaniment of the meat-offering (Leviticus 2: 1, 16; 6: 15; 24: 7). When burnt it emitted a fragrant odour, and hence the incense became a symbol of the Divine name (Malachi 1: 11; Canticle 1:3) and an emblem of prayer (Psalms 141: 2; Luke 1: 10; Revelations 5: 8; 8: 3)."¹⁴

¹³Berthold Laufer, *Chinese contributions to the history of civilization in ancient Iran: Sino-Iranica*, Field Museum of Natural History, Publication 201, Anthropological Series, volume 15, No. 3, (Chicago, 1919) p. 193.

¹⁴"Frankincense", Net Bible, Biblical Studies Press 1996–2009, <<http://classic.net.bible.org/dictionary.php?word=frankincense>> (accessed 2012-07-10).

Moringa = Ben

Botanical name: *Moringa oleifera*, *M. Arabica* (Family: *Moringaceae*); English: moringa tree, ben (oil) tree; German: Behenbaum, Behennussbaum; French: moringa ailé, ben ailé, ben oléifère; Arabic: حبّ البان (seed of *bān*); Persian: بان (*bān*, derived from *pān* in Pahlavi).

This tree is native to South and Southeast Asia. Fruits are born as long pods inside which seeds are produced. It is also called 'horseradish tree' for the taste of the roots and 'drumstick tree' for its long, slender green pods. Seeds are angular with nearly 40% oil content, known as ben oil or behen oil for its high concentration of behenic acid. The oil is clear and sweet, with a pale yellow colour, and possesses an exceptional oxidative stability. It is the most stable oil in nature and does not go rancid. This unusual property may explain why the Egyptians placed vases of this oil in their tombs.

The healing properties of this oil have been documented by many cultures. Bīrūnī (d. 1049) mentioned this plant in his book of pharmacy, *Ketāb al-ṣaydana*.¹⁵ In ancient times, ben oil was used in skin preparations and ointments by Egyptians. Today, because of its very long shelf-life, perfume makers value ben oil for its retention of scents and use it as a moisturiser and skin conditioner. In the past, seed was burned in rituals, often along with musk and agarwood, for its sweet smell, and was mixed with wine.

ورش بیوی گمان بری که گل سرخ
بوی بدو داد و مشک و عنبر و بان

In description of the red wine:

You may think it got the smell from rose,
And, from musk, ambergris¹⁶, and *bān*.

Rūdakī¹⁷, d. 941

The red wine is talking:

ز خوشرنگی جو گل گشتم ز خوشبویی چو بان گشتم
زیبم باد ویرف دی به ختم اندر نهان گشتم
I got the colour from rose and the fragrance from *bān*,
I took refuge in a vat from the winter cold.

Farroḥī Sistānī, d. 1038

Ġamšīd, the fourth mythical king of Persia, brought along fragrant materials:

چو بان و چو کافور و چون مشک ناب
چو عود و چو عنبر چو روشن گلاب
Such as *bān*, camphor and pure musk,
Such as agarwood, ambergris and clear rosewater.

Šāh-nāma; Ġamšīd, 1/ 42

¹⁵ Abū Rayḥān Bīrūnī, *Ketāb al-ṣaydana*, Persian adaptation by Abū Bakr b. 'Alī Kāšānī, (ed.) M. Sotūda and Ī. Afšār, 2 volumes, (Tehran, 1358 Š. /1979).

¹⁶ Amber or ambergris is of animal origin. It is believed to be produced in the whale's intestines, thrown out and washed up on beaches as a grey, mottled substance.

¹⁷ *Dīvān-e Rūdakī Samarqandī*, (eds.) Sa'īd Nafīsī and I. S. Braginski (Tehran, 2006).

مردمی و رادمردی زو همی بوید به طبع
 همچنان کر کلبه عطّار بوید مشک و بان
 Humanity and bravery emanate from his nature,
 As musk and *bān* smells from apothecary.

Farroḥī Sīstānī, d. 1038

از زلف تو بوی عنبر و بان آید
 زان تنگ دهان هزار چندان آید
 I smell ambergris and *bān* from your hair,
 And a thousand times more from your small mouth.

Farroḥī Sīstānī, d. 1038

هم ز وصف لب زبان خجل است
 هم ز زلف تو مشک و بان خجل است
 Tongue is short of words to describe your lips,
 So is musk and *bān* to describe your hair.

Auḥādī Marāḡe¹⁸, 1274–1337

Myrrh

Botanical name: *Commiphora myrrha* (Family: *Burseraceae*); English: myrrh, myrrh tree; German: Myrrhe; French: myrrhe, arbre à myrrhe; Arabic: مَرَّ (murr); Persian: مَرِّ مَكِّي (morr from Mecca).

The genus name *Commiphora* derives from two Greek words, together meaning gum carrier. The word Myrrh is from a Hebrew and Arabic word “*murr*”, meaning “bitter”. The resin from another species in Northern Somalia is known as “Coptic Frankincense” which is mostly sold to Saudi Arabia where Muslim pilgrims traditionally buy it in Mecca and bring it home.

This small tree is native to the Southwest Arabian Peninsula and Northeast Africa. It has an exceptional ability to retain its water content and withstand drought for long periods. The trunk is swollen with a peeling, papery bark under which it is green and photosynthetic; it produces many knotted, spiny branches that end in a sharp spine. The stem, the cut branches, and nipped buds exude a wonderful fragrance that soon fills the room. The scent remains on the fingers. The pale yellow, liquid resin dries into irregular masses or clumps of a walnut size, referred to as myrrh.

Myrrh is a constituent of perfumes and incense, and was highly prized in ancient times. Egyptians used it in the mixtures for embalming the bodies of Pharaohs. It was used as an aromatic at funerals and as a wine preservative as well.

Ancient Greek and Roman physicians used myrrh to treat wounds, and prescribed it internally as a digestive aid and as a remedy for infections. Myrrh was an important trade item in ancient times. It is used today as an aid to prevent tooth decay and gum disease.

According to Easton’s Bible Dictionary, Myrrh was “first mentioned as a principal ingredient in the holy anointing oil (Exodus 30: 23). It formed part of the gifts brought by the wise men from the east, who came to worship the infant Jesus (Matthew 2: 11). It was used both in embalming (John 19: 39), also as a perfume (Esther 2: 12; Psalm 45: 8; Proverbs 7: 17). It was a custom of the Jews to give those who were condemned to death

¹⁸ *Dīvān-e Auḥādī Marāḡe’ī*, (ed.) Sa’id Nafisī, (Tehran, 1983).

by crucifixion ‘wine mingled with myrrh’ to produce insensibility. This drugged wine was probably partaken of by the two malefactors, but when the Roman soldiers pressed it upon Jesus ‘he received it not’ (Mark 15: 23).¹⁹

Myrrh and frankincense are very similar. Both are native to the Arabian Peninsula; both grow as small trees or shrubs; the resins are actually the milky liquid that exudes from the bark after making incisions with an ordinary axe; the exudates harden on exposure to air into droplets and collectors easily detach them after about two weeks; both have had spiritual significance since ancient times. However, myrrh is neutral and bitter while frankincense is warm and acrid.

Rose

Botanical name: *Rosa* spp. (Family: *Rosaceae*); English: rose; German: Rose; French: rose; Arabic: ورد (*vard*); Persian: گل سرخ (*gol-e sorh*).

Rosewater, *golāb*, is a distillate obtained from rose petals in Persia. It is widely used in foods, as a home medicament and purifier, and for special religious occasions. In funeral services in mosques, an attendant offers it to each arriving participant to sprinkle on his hands and face before touching a copy of the Koran to be read silently during the service. Reputedly, the best is the rosewater of Qamṣar in Kāšān, where the ceremonial process of plucking roses and extracting the distillate has become a tourist attraction in spring. In olden times, the rosewater of Gūr (Gūr, the old name of Fīrūzābād in southern Iran) was “proverbial as to its fragrance”, and was exported to the farthest countries.

Ka‘ba, the holiest place for Muslims, is washed twice a year with water from *Zamzam* spring and rosewater. This customary ritual follows the practice of the Holy Prophet of cleansing the Ka‘ba on the day he conquered Mecca. The king of Saudi Arabia proceeds to wash the interior and the walls. Prior to Islam, Persians used to spread perfumes at the fire temples. A very fragrant essential oil is also produced from roses, but in a much smaller quantity and sold at a much higher price. About four tons of rose petals yield one kg of this oil.

The Zoroastrian *āfrīnagān* ceremony is a religious ritual, which is frequently performed. It is a ceremony of offerings to the Lord of Wisdom (Ahūrā Mazda) and consists of three Avestan scriptures recited by two ritual priests. Eight fragrant flowers are laid out in two columns of three each with two below. Before the ritual and during each recitation, different sets of flowers are exchanged between the standing and the seated priests. The gestures of flower exchange are highly articulated, simple and aesthetically harmonious, both rhythmically and visually. The focus of the ritual is on the establishment of righteousness. It represents the proper connection between this visible world and the invisible realms.²⁰

Saffron

Botanical name: *Crocus sativus* (Family: *Iridaceae*); English: saffron*; German: Safran; French: safran; Arabic: زعفران (*za‘farān*); Persian: زعفران (*za‘farān*).

¹⁹“Myrrh”, Net Bible, Biblical Studies Press 1996–2009, <<http://classic.net.bible.org/dictionary.php?word=myrrh>> (accessed 2012-07-10).

²⁰Ron G. Williams and James W. Boyd, *Ritual Art and Knowledge: Aesthetic Theory and Zoroastrian Ritual*, (Columbia, 1993).

*Saf, in Latin, indicates yellow colour.

This bulbous perennial plant is native to Iran. Over 90% of the world production of saffron is produced in Iran. It is treasured for its golden, pungent stigmas, which are dried and used to flavour and colour foods, and as a dye. The Bible describes saffron as a sweet-smelling herb (Song of Solomon 4: 14). It has a strong, exotic aroma and a bitter taste.

Saffron collectors, often women, start before dawn. They handpick flowers, remove the three stigmas from each flower (without including the white style and yellow anthers), and spread and dry them on trays. Picking flowers is hard labour, and fieldwork is finished soon after sunrise. About 150–200 flowers yield one gram of saffron, which has 0.5–1 percent essential oil. It is the world's most expensive spice, in some periods as valuable as gold, weight for weight.

Autumn leaves, moon crescent, sunshine and the faces of ailing people have been compared to saffron in Persian poetry:

رخ‌ها بنگر تو زعفرانی
کز درد همی دهد نشانی
Look at the faces with saffron colour,
They indicate pain and suffering.

Rūmī, 1207–1273

In ancient times, loyal subjects used to spread saffron under the footsteps of kings and dignitaries. In welcoming the Persian King Bahrām e Gōr:

درم ریختند از کران تا کران
همان مشک و دینار و هم زعفران
They spread silver coins all over,
And, saffron, musk and gold coins as well.

Šāh-nāma; Bahrām e Gūr, 6/ 2353

Saffron was strewn in royal courts and festivities as a perfume:

بفرمود تا آتش افروختند
همه عنبر و زعفران سوختند
He ordered to set fire,
They burned ambergris and saffron.

Šāh-nāma; Fereydūn, 1/ 8

نشسته به هر جای رامشگران
گلاب و می و مشک با زعفران
The minstrels were all at their places,
And, rosewater, wine, musk and saffron were everywhere.

Šāh-nāma; Gīv going to Turkistan, 2/ 481

There are people who believe carrying or wearing charms and amulets, often around the neck, repels the devil's eyes, averts harm, and cures sickness. Some make a living from writing incantations for charms and amulets. The amulet writers often use saffron ink and ask their customers to wash the scripts off the charm or paper and drink it as a cure. Customers may be uneducated women who seek help in winning their husbands' love or getting rid of rival wives, or else men with financial problems. On the other hand, it is a known fact that saffron

has a laughter-inducing quality and eating saffron makes a person joyful and happy, although one cannot be sure whether the happiness is genuine. Thus, this superstitious prescription is based on a scientific reality.

هان رفیقان نشره آبی یا زگالابی بساز
کز دل و چهره زگال و زعفران آورده ام
Oh my friends! Make charcoal or saffron ink for the amulet,
Make it with my burnt heart and yellow face.

Hāqānī, 1126–1199

زعفران رخ ما از حذر چشم بد است
ما حریف چمن و لاله ستانیم همه
Our yellow face is the saffron amulet against evil eyes,
We defeat all those with rosy cheeks.

Rūmī, 1207–1273

چو بی زعفران گشته ای خنده ناک
مخور زعفران تا نگریدی هلاک
Since you laugh without saffron,
Do not eat any, lest you die.

Nezāmī Ganjāvī, 1141–1209

Sandalwood

Botanical name: *Santalum album* (Family: Santalaceae). English: sandalwood tree, white or East Indian sandalwood; German: Sandelholzbaum, Sandelbaum; French: santal blanc; Arabic: صندل (*ṣandal*); Persian: صندل (*ṣandal*), چندن (*čandan*).²¹

The sandal tree is native to India. It reaches full maturity in about 60 years, when the heartwood of the slender trunk has achieved its greatest oil content. Instead of cutting the whole tree at its base, most people uproot it during the rainy season, when the root is richer in essential oil and more easily uprooted, a practice making it more vulnerable to extinction.

Sandalwood is valuable and, once it burns, spreads a pleasant fragrance for its yellowish oil content. Santalol constitutes more than 90% of the sandalwood oil. This alcohol accounts for the characteristic odour and medicinal properties of the oil. In Hinduism, wood and oil of sandalwood are often used for rituals or ceremonies, such as an embalming paste in Lord Shiva temples. Hindus wear a small mark of this paste on their foreheads right above the middle of the eyes, supposedly to keep the third eye cool.

گویند مردمان که بدش هست و نیک هست
آری نه سنگ و چوب همه لعل و چندن است
Among people, there are bad ones too,
Yes, not all stones and wood are spinel and sandalwood.

Anvarī²², d. 1187

Sandalwood is valued in skincare for its moisturising and skin healing properties. Sandalwood oil is mildly sedative and warming. In folk medicine, reflected throughout Persian poetry,

²¹ All above names are derived from the Arabic name, except the Persian name *čandan* from Sanskrit.

²² *Dīvān-e Anvarī*, (ed.) M. T. Modarres Rażavī, Bongāh-e Tarjōmeh va Našr-e Ketāb, (Tehran, 1961).

placing sandalwood on the forehead has been a treatment for headache and lowering fever:

پیرمردی ز نزع می نلاید
پیرزن صندلش همی ملاید

The old man was groaning on his deathbed,
The old woman was rubbing him with sandalwood.

Sa'adī²³, ca 1207–1294

Although the species name, *album*, refers to the whitish colour of bark, another species, *Santalum rubrum*, has red bark:

پرآن خدنگ او به گه حرب و گاو صید
از خون چنان شود که ندانی ز چندنش
His arrow at the battlefield and hunting,
So bloody that looks like sandalwood.

Sūzanī Samarqandī²⁴, d. ca 1170

ترکیب او ز گونه سرخ و مزاج سرد
هم رنگ آب صندل و هم طبع صندل است
She has rosy cheeks and cool temper,
Same as sandalwood, for colour and nature.

Amīr Mo'ezzī, d. ca 1126

In winter, naked sandalwood trees are not identifiable and in summer, the snakes coil themselves around the trees for coolness, making the trees unapproachable. Therefore, sandalwood collectors shoot arrows, presumably with nametags at the trees from a distance to mark them as their property and then return in winter to claim their own trees.²⁵ Classic Persian poets have mentioned this association of sandalwood tree and snake:

مار اگرچه به خاصیت نه نکوست
پاسبان درخت صندل اوست
Although snake is harmful by nature,
It is the guardian of sandalwood tree.

Sanā'ī²⁶, d. 1141

The following verse describes a red-coloured horse:

عنان بر گردن سرخش فکنده
چو دو مار سبه بر شاخ چندن
The rein on her red neck,
Looks like two black snakes on the sandalwood tree.

Manūchehrī Dāmḡānī²⁷, d. 1041

²³ *Kollīyāt-e Sa'adī*, (ed.) Moḥammad-'Alī Forūḡī, Tehran, 1362.

²⁴ *Divān-e Sūzanī Samarqandī*, (ed.) Naṣer-al-dīn Šāh-Ḥosaynī, (Tehran, 1359 Š. /1980–81 common era date needed).

²⁵ Naṣir-al-Dīn Moḥammad Ṭūsī, *Tansūhnāma-ye 'l ḥānī*, (ed.) M. T. Modarres Raḡavī, 2nd edition., (Tehran, 1363 Š. /1984–85).

²⁶ *Divān-e Sanā'ī*, (ed.) Maḡāher Moṣaff, (Tehran, 1357 Š. /1978–79 common era date needed).

²⁷ *Divān-e Manūchehrī Dāmḡānī*, (ed.) M. Dabīr-Sīyāqī, (Tehran, 1968).

درخت صندل آمد قامت تو
 که می پیچد در او زلفت چو ماری
 Your stature looks like a sandalwood tree,
 And your hair coils around it like a snake.

Amīr Ḥosrow Dehlavī²⁸, 1253–1325

Wild rue = Syrian rue

Botanical name: *Peganum harmala* (Family: *Zygophyllaceae*); English: wild rue, Syrian rue (in USA); German: Harmelkraut, Gemeine syrische Raute, Wilde Raute; French: rue sauvage; Arabic: حَرَمَل (*ḥarmal*); Persian: سپند (*sepand*) or اسفند (*esfand*).

This perennial wild plant is native to the desert areas of Iran, Central Asia and India. It produces many small brown seeds in globular capsules. The seed is rich with two alkaloids, harmine and harmaline, which have been used to treat clinical depression, in moderate doses, and produce a feeling of well-being and contentment in larger doses. Despite its various medicinal effects, it is a material that has been widely used in rituals since ancient times.

Seeds are dropped on red-hot charcoal, where they make a loud popping noise and give off a great deal of fragrant smoke. The smoke is swirled around a child's head in a circular pattern to rid the child of the evil eye while some rhyming verse is chanted. Iranians add frankincense and leaves of an herb to make a blend for burning, but the rite is essentially identical in all regional cultures.

In Persian, this custom is called “*esfand dūd kardan*,” or burning *esfand* or *sepand*. It is also a funeral rite used to protect mourners against evil. During weddings, childbirth, and travel, one family member performs it for all others to prevent bad things from happening to the bride, infant or traveller.

The word *aspand*, a variant of *sepand*, refers to a class of Zoroastrian archangels, and the use of fire is Zoroastrian as well. The month of *Esfand* in the ancient Zoroastrian calendar and current Iranian calendar (the 12th month, beginning February 20), marks the *Esfandgān* feast, which is held on Spandārmaz Day (the 5th day of *Esfand*). It is a celebration of womankind and a tribute to mothers. This sacred Zoroastrian rite, inherited from the era of the Persian Empire, has survived and is widely practiced in Muslim nations.

Sepand was mentioned by Ḥanẓala Bādġīsī²⁹ (d. 835), the earliest Persian poet from whom a one-page record exists:

یارم سپند اگرچه بر آتش همی فکند
 از بهر چشم تا نرسد مرو را گزند
 او را سپند و آتش ناید همی به کار
 با روی همجو آتش و با خال چون سپند
 Although my beloved drops *sepand* on the fire,
 To rid herself of evil eye;
 With her fiery face and *sepand* like mole,
Sepand and fire do not help her at all.

²⁸ *Dīvān-e Amīr Ḥosrow Dehlavī*, (ed.) M. Darvīš, (Tehran, 1364 Š. /1985–86 common era date needed).

²⁹ *Miscellaneous poetry from the earliest Persian Poets*, volume 2 (ed.) Gilbert Lazard (Tehran, 1964) p. 12.

Sepand makes a loud popping noise:

از مروت نیست منع صوفی از ذکر بلند
 مَهر خاموشی در آتش چون زند بر لب سپند؟
 It is not fair to keep the Sufi from loud prayer,
 How can *sepand* be silent while on the fire?

Şā'eb, 1607–1670

خبر از خود ندارم چون سپند از بی‌قراری‌ها
 نمی‌دانم کجا خیزم، نمی‌دانم کجا افتم
 Like *sepand*, I am restless and not self-conscious,
 I have no idea where to fly, where to land.

Şā'eb, 1607–1670

“*Sepand* on fire” is proverbial for anxiety and restlessness:

چنان برخاستم از جا مشویش
 که برخیزد سپند از روی آتش
 I jumped up frightfully,
 As does *sepand* off the fire.
*Moḥtašam-e Kāšānī*³⁰, d. 1588
 چون نیست هیچ‌کس که به فریاد من رسد
 خود رقص می‌کنم چو سپند از نوای خویش
 Because no one cares and listens to me,
 I have to dance with my own tune like *sepand*.

Şā'eb, 1607–1670

ز گرمی تب ما تا شود طیب آگه
 کفی سپند فشانند به روی بستر ما
 To know if I had a high fever,
 The physician dropped *sepand* on my bed.

Kalīm Kāšānī³¹, d. 1651

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³⁰ *Dīvān-e Moḥtašam-e Kāšānī* (ed.) S. H. Sādāt Nāšerī and Mehr-‘Alī Garkānī, 2 vols., (Tehran, 1994).

³¹ *Dīvān-e Abū Ṭāleb Kalīm Kāšānī*, (ed.) Ḥosayn Partow Bayzā'ī, (Tehran, 1957).