
Historical Garden

Plants and their myths

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***Cupressus sempervirens* L., Mediterranean cypress**



Order: Pinales

Family: Cupressaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: March-May

Biotope: rocky area in mountains & ravines, on hillsides & cliffs, forming woodland with other trees or as stands, around villages & cemeteries

Distribution: N. Africa, W. Asia, S. Europe

Uses: environmental, materials, medicines

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*, and in Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, XVI, 139-142.

Mythology: Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, X, 106-142., and Strabo *Geography*.

Metamorphosis of Cyparissus. Ovid tells about the legend of a young boy loved by the god Apollo, named Cyparissus, who accidentally killed his favorite companion, a tamed stag, with his hunting javelin. The boy's grief was such that Apollo transformed him into a cypress tree.

Birth of Apollon. The god Apollo was born and raised in the sacred Ortygian cypress grove in Lycia. There he was nursed by the Nymph Ortygia.

Ficus carica L., Common fig



Order: Rosales

Family: Moraceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: March-April

Biotope: calcareous cliffs, olive groves, cultivated areas, roadsides

Distribution: N. Africa, W & Tropical Asia, S. Europe

Uses: human food, environmental, medicines

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*

Mythology: Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, III 78b, in Pausanias *Description of Greece*, 1.37.2, and in Plutarch, *Parallel lives*, 4.

Syceus. The legend tells that the earth-goddess Gaia followed by Jupiter was saved by her son, a Titanus named Syceus, who hid her into a fig-tree. Or that Jupiter was chasing a Titan, called Syceus, and the mother of Syceus, Gaia, protected him into a fig tree.

Phytalus. Phytalus was a man who gave Demeter hospitality when she was searching for her daughter, Persephone. Demeter thanked Phytalus for his kindness by giving him a fig- tree.

Syce. Syce was one of the nymphs Hamadryads, the eight daughters of Oxylos and Hamadryad. The Hamadryades were beings that lived in the trees or where the trees themselves, while dryads were the spirits of trees. If a tree died, its nymph died too, therefore dryads and gods would be punished any mortal who harmed a tree.

Founding of Rome. The legend tells that the basket where Romulus and Remo were abandoned on the Tiber's river stopped under a fig-tree.

***Juglans regia* L., Walnut**



Order: Fagales

Family: Juglandaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Distribution: W & Tropical Asia, S. Europe

Uses: human food, environmental, materials, medicines

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*, in Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History* XV, 86.

Mythology: Servius *Commentary*, VIII, 29 and Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*.

Metamorphosis of Carya. The Laconian king Dion and the queen Iphithea had three daughters, one of them was Carya. When Dionysus visited the court of the king he fell in love with Carya. The other two sisters tried to prevent the liaison but they were driven mad by the god, and having gone to Mount Taygetos were transformed into stones. Carya meanwhile died and was changed into a nut tree. The goddess Artemis informed her father Dion of the events and he founded a sanctuary in honor of Artemis Caryatis.

Carya: Carya was one of the nymphs Hamadryads, the eight daughters of Oxylos and Hamadryad. The Hamadryades were beings that lived in the trees or where the trees themselves, while dryads were the spirits of trees. If a tree died, its nymph died too, therefore dryads and gods would be punished any mortal who harmed a tree.

***Laurus nobilis* L., bay laurel**



Order: Laurales

Family: Lauraceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: March-April

Biotope: woodland, olive groves, scrub, calcareous cliffs

Distribution: N. Africa, W. Asia, S. Europe

Uses: food additives, environmental, materials, medicines

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*.

Mythology: Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, I 450-567; X, 92.

Metamorphosis of Daphne. Daphne was an Arcadian Nymph loved by the god Apollo. When he pursued her, she fled and transformed into a laurel tree to escape him. The plant was ever after sacred to the god.

***Malus domestica* Borkh., apple tree**



Order: Rosales

Family: Rosaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Uses: human food, medicines

Mythology: Mentioned in Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, X, 560-704.

Melos, Peleia and Adonis: Melos was a close friend of Adonis and husband of his sister Peleia. When Adonis died by Aris, because of his relation with Aphrodite, his close friend Melos could not stand the sorrow and hung himself from a tree. Peleia loved her husband very much and not being able to deal with her distress, killed herself, too. Aphrodite felt very sad about all these deaths and transformed Melos to apple, hence the tree became an apple tree and Peleia to pigeon.

Judgment of Paris. At the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, Eris the goddess of strife, cast a golden apple addressed to the fairest amongst the goddesses. Aphrodite, Hera and Athena all laid claim to the prize. They were referred by Zeus to the shepherd prince Paris, who awarded the apple to Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty.

***Morus nigra* L., black mulberry**



Order: Rosales

Family: Moraceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Distribution: W. & Tropical Asia, Europe

Uses: human food, medicines

Mythology: Mentioned in Ovid, *Metamorphosis* and in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*

Death of Pyramos & Thisbe. Pyramos and Thisbe were a pair of ill-fated lovers from the Assyrian city of Babylon. Their parents forbade their romance and the pair agreed to meet secretly beneath a white-berried mulberry tree outside the city limits. When Pyramos arrived he found Thisbe's shawl in the jaws of a lion and believing her killed, plunged a sword through his breast. The girl upon discovering her dead lover also killed herself. The mulberry tree soaked up the lovers' blood and its berries were turned from white to black-red.

Hamadryas Morea. Morea was one of the nymphs Hamadryads, the eight daughters of Oxylos and Hamadryad. The Hamadryades were beings that lived in the trees or where the trees themselves, while dryads were the spirits of trees. If a tree died, its nymph died too, therefore dryads and gods would punish any mortal who harmed a tree.

***Myrtus communis* L., myrtle**



Order: Myrtales

Family: Myrtaceae

Grown habit: shrub-tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: April-June

Biotope: olive groves, scrub, watercourses, damp ground

Distribution: N. Africa, W. Asia, S. Europe

Uses: environmental, materials, medicines

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*, and in Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, XV, 122-126.

Mythology: Mentioned in Ovid, *Fasti*, IV, 141-143.

The Myrtle is sacred to Venus. Ovid tells that the goddess, born from the sea in the island of Cyprus, covered her nakedness using myrtle.

Another legend tells that when Dionysus went to the underworld, to free his mother Selene, he brought a plant of Myrtle.

***Phoenix dactylifera* L., date palm**



Order: Arecales

Family: Arecaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: February-June

Uses: environmental, human food, animal food, materials, medicines

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*.

Mythology: *Homeric Hymn*

Birth of Apollo: The goddess Leto gave birth to Apollo on the island of Delos whilst clinging to a palm tree beside the river Inopos.

***Phillyrea angustifolia* L., phillyrea**



Order: Lamiales

Family: Oleaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: March-May

Distribution: N Africa, S. Europe

Uses: environmental

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*.

Mythology: Hyginus, *Fabulae*

Metamorphosis of Philyra: Philyra was a Thessalian nympe loved by the Titan Kronos. When his wife Rhea interrupted their meeting he transformed himself into a horse and fled. Philyra later gave birth to the centaur, Kheiron, but was very ashamed to give birth to a half-man half-horse. Therefore, she begged Zeus to change her form and he agreed, transforming her into a tree.

***Phillyrea latifolia* L., phyllirea**



Order: Lamiales

Family: Oleaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: March-May

Biotope: woodland, maquis, scrub, rocky places

Distribution: N. Africa, W. Asia, S. Europe

Uses: environmental

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*.

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***Pinus pinea* L., Italian stone pine**



Order: Pinales

Family: Pinaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: April-May

Distribution: W. Asia, S. Europe

Uses: environmental, human food

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*.

Metamorphosis Pitys. Pan fall in love with the nymph Pitys but she fled and was transformed into a pine tree. Therefore, the pine (and fur) is considered sacred tree to the god Pan.

Oreades. Pitys was one of the nymphs Oreades that protected the mountain peaks and were born and died with their native pines.

***Platanus orientalis* L., plane tree, chenar**



Order: Proteales

Family: Platanaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: April-May

Biotope: along rivers, streams, by springs, often planted for shade in & near villages

Distribution: W. Asia, SE. Europe

Uses: environmental, materials

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*.

Mythology: Homer and Pausanias

Sacrifice at Aulis: When the Greek fleet was gathered at Aulis in preparation for the departure to Troy, Agamemnon and the other leaders made sacrifices to the gods beneath the sacred plane tree. Zeus then sent an omen: a speckled serpent devoured a nest of birds in the tree, eight chicks with their mother, and was afterwards turned to stone. The seer Kalkhas interpreted this to mean that the Trojan War would last nine years with Troy finally falling in the tenth.

***Populus alba* L., white poplar**



Order: Malpighiales

Family: Salicaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: April-May

Distribution: N. Africa, Asia, Europe

Uses: environmental, materials

History: Mentioned in Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History* XIV, 10; XXXV, 13.

Mythology: Mentioned in Ovid *Metamorphosis*, II, 340-366

Ovid tells the story of the Heliades, daughters of Helios and Clymene. Their brother, Phaëthon, died after attempting to drive his father's chariot (the sun) across the sky. The Heliades grieved for four months and the gods turned them into poplar trees and their tears into amber.

Metamorphosis Leuke: Leuke was a nymph, a daughter of Oceanus, who was carried off by Plouton king of Hades, the underworld. After her death she was changed into a white poplar in the Elysium. The white poplar was then sacred to Hades. When Herakles returned from the underworld, he was crowned with poplar leaves. When Herakles established the Olympic Games at Olympia he introduced the white poplar from Thesprotia for its shade.

***Prunus dulcis* (Mill.) D. A. Webb, almond**



Order: Rosales

Family: Rosaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: January-February

Distribution: W. Asia

Uses: food additive, human food, bee plant, materials, medicines

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*

Mythology: Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 7. 17. 8

Birth of Attis: In Phrygia there was born an hermaphroditic deity named Agdistis. The gods were fearful and castrated her, creating the goddess Kybele. The genitals were cast upon the earth where they sprouted and grew into an almond tree. Once when the nymph Nana was sitting beneath its branches a nut fell into her lap and impregnated her. The child conceived was Attis, who grew up to become the consort of the Kybele.

***Punica granatum* L., pomegranate**



Order: Myrtales

Family: Lythraceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: April-September

Distribution: W. & Tropical Asia, Europe

Uses: environmental, human food, materials

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*.

Mythology: Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, V, 341-571.

Metamorphosis of Side. Side was the wife of the giant Orion who boasted to be more beautiful than the goddess Hera. In anger the goddess sent her to Hades. Her blood fell on the ground of Hades where a pomegranate sprouted.

Rape of Persephone. Hades the king of the underworld abducted Persephone for his wife. She refused to eat while she remained with him, until he tempted her with the seed of the pomegranate. She tasted these and in so doing was condemned to spend a portion of each year in the underworld.

Orchardist Askalaphos. The keeper of the pomegranate orchards of Hades reported to his master that Persephone had tasted of the seed. As punishment for this Demeter turned him into a screech owl.

***Pyrus communis* L., pear**



Order: Rosales

Family: Rosaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Distribution: Asia, Europe

Uses: human food, materials, medicines

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*, in Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, XV, 53-56 and in Pausanias, *Description of Greece*

The travel writer Pausanias mentions that the ancient cult statues were crafted out of pear-wood.

***Quercus coccifera* L., kermes oak**



Order: Fagales

Family: Fagaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: March-April

Biotope: woodland, maquis, scrub, garigue

Distribution: N. Africa, W. Asia, S. Europe

Uses: materials

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*

Mythology: Mentioned in Ovid, *Metamorphosis* and in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*
Sacred to Zeus who gave his oracles from the sacred oaks of Dodona.

Valanos and Dryades. Valanos was one of the nymphs Hamadryads, the eight daughters of Oxylos and Hamadryad. The Hamadryades were beings that lived in the trees or where the trees themselves, while dryads were the spirits of trees. If a tree died, its nymph died too, therefore dryads and gods would punished any mortal who harmed a tree.

Metamorphosis of Philemon. Philemon and Baukis were a pious couple who hospitably received the gods Zeus and Hermes when they were travelling amongst mankind in disguise. The gods destroyed those who had turned them away and rewarded the couple by making them priests of the temple and transforming them into a pair of entwined trees at death: Baukis a linden, and Philemon an oak.

The Golden Fleece. The golden fleece was nailed to the branches of an oak tree in the sacred grove of Ares at Kolchis.

***Quercus ilex* L., evergreen oak**



Order: Fagales

Family: Fagaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: March-April

Biotope: woodland, maquis, humid valleys, calcareous cliffs

Distribution: N. Africa, W. Asia, S. Europe

Uses: environmental, human food, materials

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*.

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***Quercus ithaburensis* Decne. subsp. *macrolepis* (Kotschy) Hedge & Yalt., Vallonea oak**



Order: Fagales

Family: Fagaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: April-May

Biotope: woodland, olive groves, maquis, scrub, often as isolated tree in cultivated areas

Distribution: W. Asia, SE. Europe

Uses: materials

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*.

Mythology: Mentioned in Ovid, *Metamorphosis* and in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*. Sacred to Zeus who gave his oracles from the sacred oaks of Dodona.

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The Golden Fleece. The golden fleece was nailed to the branches of an oak tree in the sacred grove of Ares at Kolchis.

***Quercus pubescens* Willd., downy oak**



Order: Fagales

Family: Fagaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: April-May

Biotope: Woodland, maquis, scrub, garigue, often as isolated tree in cultivated areas

Distribution: W. Asia, Europe

Uses: environmental

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*.

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***Salix alba* L., blue willow**



Order: Malpighiales

Family: Salicaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: March-April

Biotope: river-banks, streams, marshy places

Distribution: N. Africa, W. & C. Africa, Europe

Uses: bee plan, medicines, environmental

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, Enquiry into Plants

Mythology:

Metamorphosis Hesperides. When Orpheus and the Argonauts encountered the Hesperides in their garden, the three nymphs transformed themselves into trees: Erytheia became an elm, Hesperie a poplar and Aigle a willow tree.

***Taxus baccata* L., English yew**



Order: Pinales

Family: Taxaceae

Grown habit: tree

Duration: perennial

Distribution: N. Africa, W. Asia, Europe

Uses: environmental, medicines

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, Enquiry into Plants

Mythology: Erinyes held a yew branch as one of their attributes and used to purify their victims.

***Vitex agnus-castus* L., chasteberry**



Order: Lamiales

Family: Lamiaceae

Grown habit: shrub-tree

Duration: perennial

Flowering: August-October

Biotope: riparian woodland, marshes & damp places, lake-shore, river banks, gorge beds, maritime sands

Distribution: N. Africa, W & C. Asia, S. Europe

Uses: environmental, medicines

History: Mentioned in Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*.

Mythology: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*

Birth of Hera. The goddess Hera was born and nursed beneath a sacred chaste-tree on the island of Samos. Hera protects marriage and the plant is a symbol of purity.