

Homes, inns, businesses light up the night



Jack Fichter/CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE

The Albert Stevens Inn in West Cape May, above, won the best Christmas decorations display category from the Chamber of Commerce of Greater Cape May. Top left, 910 Washington St. Bottom left, Henry Sawyer Inn. Below left, 922 Washington St. Below right, the Mason Cottage.



Frankincense, myrrh resin from Mideast scrub shrub

Plants have played such an important part in man's history as food, medicine and other special uses. This time of the year I love to read and write about two very ancient herbs, frankincense and myrrh.

It is usually only at this time of the year that we hear about them. You may wonder why they are mentioned in a garden column since most people think of them as something in church, a carol or holiday cards.

However, both frankincense and myrrh are derived from the gummy sap that oozes out of the *Boswellia* and *Commiphora* trees when their bark is cut. The sap, or resin, seeps out and hardens. It is usually scraped off the trunk. It can be edible and may be chewed like gum. More often these fragrant "tears" of harden sap are burned, with frankincense giving off a sweet, citrusy scent and myrrh producing a piney, bitter odor. Both frankincense and myrrh are the resins from real plants that grow in the Middle East and Africa. They grow in very harsh, dry climates and will not adapt to this area or I would grow them.

The Magi, or three kings "from afar," brought gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus on Jan. 6 — Epiphany, or little Christmas, as my Babci called it. It often goes unnoticed by many modern people, but just a few generations ago people visited

Lorraine's Garden Lore

By Lorraine Kiefer, Triple Oaks Nursery

and parted from Christmas until this day in January. Most churches still observe Epiphany and leave their decorations up until after Epiphany.

I wouldn't think of taking mine down until mid January, but then I put them up after Thanksgiving not before. We have long had an Epiphany party the weekend nearest this day. The best part of the party is having the incense of frankincense and myrrh burning all along my front walkway to the house. I love this ancient scent and am glad when it is used at holiday Mass. Unfortunately the fire alarms in many churches prohibit its use now. It is such an ancient custom that is linked to the first Christmas season.

Frankincense comes from the first cuts of a thorny bark of a shrubby plant called *Boswellia carteri* that grows in the Arabian Peninsula. When the resin comes from the stems, it hardens into tears or small pebbles that are often powdered to use in incense. It has a somewhat piney scent.

Ancient Israelites used frankincense when they burned it with their offerings of lamb and the first

fruits of the harvest. Early Christians also used it to celebrate Jesus as the Lamb of God. The idea is that the fragrant smoke used in rites and ceremonies is said to sanctify and carry praise and prayer to heaven. This smoke is also thought to clear the air for higher thinking or meditation.

Myrrh is the other Biblical resin used in early incense and also brought by the kings, or Wise Men. It comes from a plant called *Commiphora myrrha*, a native of Arabia, Ethiopia and most of northern Africa. In Arabic, the word *murr* means bitter. This refers to the taste, not the smell. The smell is considered by some to be deep and haunting. It is rarely used alone, but usually paired with frankincense. (Myrrh is used in toothpaste and mouthwash, as it is said to heal gums.)

Both frankincense and myrrh have been traded in the Middle East and North Africa for at least 5,000 years. Most readings about these herbs confirm that the ancient Egyptians bought entire boatloads of the resins from the Phoenicians, using them in incense, insect repellent, perfume and salves for wounds and



Lorraine Kiefer/Special to the STAR AND WAVE
Burned together, frankincense and myrrh are known as Holy Smoke.

sores, as in the embalming process. Myrrh oil was said to have been used by ancients for a rejuvenating facial treatment.

According to the Bible, frankincense and myrrh were the incense burned in Jerusalem's temples during ancient times. The Greeks and Romans also imported massive amounts of the resins that they burned during cremations. These ancients also used them medicinally as an antiseptic, anti-inflammatory and analgesic medicine. It is said that myrrh appears with more frequency than any other plant substance in the writings of the Greek physician Hippocrates, in the third and fourth centuries BCE. I love to read about these in my old herb books.

At the time Jesus was born, frankincense and myrrh may have been worth more than gold. Frankin-

cense and myrrh are still available in herb stores. We mix them together and call it Holy Smoke. The advent of modern medicine did much to cut the demand for both, but some alternative practitioners continue to prize the resins for their healing properties.

If you would like to experience the magic of these ancient herbs, one of the best ways to use frankincense and myrrh is to burn the crude resin on hot coals as the ancients did. This will release a distinctive aroma and mysterious trails of fragrant incense. Although the curling tendrils of burning frankincense and myrrh have been with us since antiquity, many find them much too strong to burn in the average home. Ancient temples and cathedrals had extremely high ceilings for the smoke to reach, thus diluting the fragrance. So you

may want to be cautious and burn only a couple of tears at first or do so on a porch.

Jewish, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Eastern and some other religions still use incense mixtures during some Masses and prayer services. I am always disappointed when I attend a Mass and the incense is one of the fake rose or cinnamon types. For the most part these are made from synthetic oils and smell nasty, often causing allergic reactions. There is nothing as sacred as the smell of real incense when one enters a church. I feel that it sets the stage, so to speak, and evokes a feeling or link to the past and all eternity.

So in summary, the resin of the two scrubby little shrubs of the East that have been immortalized in our Christmas carols and cards look like nothing more than brown or white pebbles. I like to put them in little bags with a touch of gold glitter tied with gold ribbon to present as Epiphany presents. On Jan. 6, drop some real frankincense and myrrh on a burning coal, wood stove or hot skillet and bring the world of the ancient kings alive via the magic of fragrance.

Triple Oaks Nursery sells real frankincense and myrrh tears and the charcoal disc on which to burn the resin. There also are authentic frankincense and myrrh candles made the same as in a monastery. Visit tripleoaks.com.



Provided



A Ferry Merry Christmas

The Cape May Chamber of Commerce held its annual holiday event, a Ferry Merry Christmas, on Sunday, Dec. 16, at the Cape May-Lewes Ferry terminal in North Cape May. Above, an elf applies snowflakes to Franki Smith's arm. Top right, Danielle Pittman helps Beau Pittman apply sprinkles to his Christmas cookie. Bottom right, Bernadette Erb of Artists on the Rocks gives instructions on a Christmas tree painting project.