This is the second article about the gifts of this season. The second and perhaps the most precious of the original gifts was Myrrh. Both myrrh and frankincense grow as small trees or shrubs. Their natural growing range is limited, but this has been extended by cultivation. Today, most of the internationally traded myrrh and frankincense are produced in the southern Arabian peninsula (Oman, Yemen) and in northeast Africa (Somalia). The primary species relied upon today are Commiphora myrrha for myrrh.

Myrrh is the dried oleo gum resin of a number of Commiphora species of trees. Like frankincense, it is produced by the tree as a reaction to a purposeful wound through the bark and into the sapwood. The trees are bled in this way on a regular basis. Another primary species is C. momol. The related Commiphora gileadensis, native to Israel/Palestine and Jordan, is the biblically referenced 'baalm of gilead'. Several other species yield bdellium, and Indian myrrh. The name "myrrh" is also applied to the potherb Myrrhis odorata otherwise known as "Cicely" or "Sweet Cicely".

Since ancient times, myrrh has been valued for its fragrance, its medicinal qualities as a wound dressing, and an aromatic stomatic. For the ancient Egyptians, it was the principal ingredient used in the embalming of mummies. So valuable has it been at times in ancient history that myrrh has been equal in weight value to gold! During times of scarcity its value rose even higher than that. If we could grow myrrh here, maybe we could get rich!

Myrrh has been used throughout history as a perfume, incense, and medicine, and has had spiritual significance since ancient times. Myrrh was a symbolically appropriate gift for the baby Jesus because it was used in embalming at the time. Therefore, while gold and frankincense symbolize the infant's royalty and divinity, respectively, myrrh makes reference to His future death. Myrrh was extremely valuable in the time of the Roman Empire, when Jesus was born, and it was used as incense burned during funerals until the 15th century. Can you believe the Roman Emperor Nero reportedly burned a year's supply of myrrh at the funeral of his wife, Poppea Sabina, in the year 65 CE? Myrrh was also used to anoint Jesus' body after the crucifixion.

In modern medicine, myrrh is used as an antiseptic in mouthwashes, gargles, and toothpastes for prevention and treatment of gum disease. Myrrh is also currently used in some liniments and healing salves that may be applied to abrasions and other minor skin ailments. Myrrh has also been recommended as an analgesic for toothaches. On going research also shows promise for diabetic medicines.

Enjoy this joyous season and select your gifts as carefully as did the ancients.

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask bcmga@gmail.com