

Plants of the Bible



Many of the plants found in the Bible also grow here in Britain or have been introduced and become naturalised, including thistles, nettles, hyssop, Cedar of Lebanon and willows. There is a long tradition of naming plants, both common names and scientific names, for their connection with the Bible and Christian saints.

Plants play various roles in the Bible including as metaphors of strength, such as the oaks and Cedars of Lebanon, or as part of parables to explain the Christian message such as tares and mustard seeds.

They also occur as foodstuffs (wheat, grapes, vegetables), building materials (the acacia for the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant), the cedar for David's palace and Solomon's Temple.

The hyssop was used to paint blood over the door on the night of the Passover in Egypt. Solomon is noted in the Bible for his knowledge of plants, from the mighty Cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. T

here are many differences of opinion as to the identification and translation of Biblical plants, not least the weeping willows on which the Jews hung their harps in Babylon, which may have been poplars rather than willows, and the apple

from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden may have been an apricot!

I have used Musselman (2007) as the basis for the list of bible plants but there are other sources given in the bibliography below. There are long traditions of both Bible Gardens and Mary Gardens in many parts of the world.



Plants Names based on Biblical characters & events:

The 18th century Swedish botanist Carl von Linnæus, the father of modern taxonomy, was given the job of identifying the plants named in the Bible. And it was he who gave us the scientific name for the crown of thorns (*Ziziphus spina-christi*) and the weeping willow (*Salix babylonica*).

The verses from Psalm 137 are well known and are the basis for the name 'weeping willow' - '*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song;*'

Some authorities now believe that the trees that the Jews hung their harps from may have been poplars rather than willows.

References & Online Resources:

Hepper, N, 1992, Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Bible Plants

Hepper, N, 1998, Planting a Bible Garden

Musselman L. J., 2007, Figs, Date, Laurel and Myrrh: Plants of the Bible and the Quran

Zohary, M., 1982, Plants of the Bible

Mary Gardens http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/resources/m_garden/marygardensmain.html

Bible Gardens

Bangor Civic Society Bible Garden (<http://www.bangorcivicsociety.org.uk/pages/hisso/bible.htm>)

Elgin Cathedral Bible Garden (<http://www.biblicalgardenelgin.com/>)

Old Dominion University Bible Plants

<http://www.odu.edu/~lmusselm/plant/bible/bible.php>



This list is based mainly on Musselman (2007). There are other interpretations including Hepper (1992) and Zohary (1982). The following plants mentioned in the Bible are either native or naturalised in the UK.

Almond (*Prunus dulcis*) - used as the model for the menorah - Moses was instructed to make the bowls of the menorah in the shape of the almond flowers and buds (Exodus 25:33 NJB; 37:19-20 NJB)

Almug wood - one of the most mysterious woods, it could be one of several candidates (sandalwood, juniper, boxwood, pine, yew) or it could be now extinct, used as part of the construction of Solomon's temple. It was included in a shipment from the King of Tyre, construction materials and also musical instruments

Apple (*Malus pumila* in Bible) - it is possible that the apple in the garden of Eden is actually an apricot (Musselman 2007)

Bitter Herbs - it is not possible to identify them with any confidence, but chicory (*Cichorium intybus*) has been suggested, also wild lettuce (*Lactuca* species) and dandelion (*Taraxacum* spp)

Bramble (*Rubus sanctus & Rubus spp*) - Jesus uses as an example: 'For every tree is known by its own fruit, for figs are not gathered from thorns, not grapes vintaged from a bramble' (Luke 6:44-45, JND) and it is used in a curse on Edom recorded in Isaiah (34:13, NIV): 'Thorns will overrun her citadels, nettles and brambles her strongholds. She will become a haunt for jackals, a home for owls.'

Calamus (*Acorus calamus*) - a highly prized and traded plant, mentioned by the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. It is also in the Song of Solomon 4:14

Cattail - another problematic identification of a water plant, it could be *Typha domingensis* or *Nelumbo lutea*, used in the description of the habitat of the Behemoth (Job 40:21-22, NIV)

Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) - one of the most symbolic trees in the Bible, used to imply strength and longevity - Ezekiel 31:2-3; '*Behold, the Assyrian was a cedar in Lebanon with fair branches, and with a shadowing shroud, and of an high stature*' - '*But as my people watched,*

I destroyed the Amorites, though they were as tall as cedars and as strong as oak' (Amos 2:9a, NLT). Both David and Solomon used cedar as a luxury building material - the house of David and the Temple of Solomon. The beams of the Al-Aqsa Mosque are made of cedar of Lebanon. Also used for purification. Solomon: '*He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the walls*' (1 Kings 4:33a, NIV)



Coriander - (*Coriandrum sativum*) - 'The manna was white like coriander seed and looked like resin' (Numbers 11:7 NIV) - there is still some uncertainty that this plant is the coriander that we know today

Cucumber (*Cucumis sativus*) - occurs in rubbish tips and from sewage in UK, mentioned in the list of plants that the children of Israel missed in the desert after they left Israel (Numbers 11:5 NIV), although this was probably a type of melon called chate melon (*Cucurbita pepo* var. *flexuosus*)

Cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*) - occurs as a casual - used in the Bible as a tithe plant and mentioned in a tirade against the Pharisees (Matthew 23:23 NIV), also in the Old Testament (Isaiah) as a highly valued spice

Dill (*Anthemum graveolens*) - naturalised as a casual - mentioned only once in the Bible in the tithe list tirade against the Pharisees (Matthew 23:23 NIV)

Fig (*Ficus caria*) - naturalised in Britain - Jeremiah told the people to submit to Nebuchednezzar and used 2 baskets of figs in front of the temple (one good & one bad) to explain his point (Jeremiah 24: 1b-4, 8 NIV). Jesus also curses a fig tree which withers (Mark 11:20-21 NIV). The most famous mention is the fig leaves used by Adam & Eve to cover their nakedness (Genesis 3:7 NLT). It was also used as food and for poultices

Flax (*Linum usitatissimum*) - used in the Bible for clothing, but also cords, wicks and measuring line, not mentioned as a foodstuff in the Bible

Flower of the Field - Musselman suggests that this could be *Papaver rhoeas* (field poppy) - 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall' (1 Peter 1:24 NIV)


Gall (not certainly a plant) but there are three possible candidates - Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), Henbane (*Hyoscyamus spp*) or, least likely, Opium poppy

Garlic (*Allium sativum*) - complaints of the children of Israel in the desert about the food they ate in the desert (Numbers 11:5 JND) - mentioned only once

Grape (*Vitis vinifera*) - no plant mentioned more times than the grape (50 times) and its products - wine (200 times), raisins, syrup and vinegar. The wood of the vine was considered worthless. Jesus compares

himself to the vine and the vintner: 'I [Jesus] am the true vine, and my father is the vine dresser. Every branch in me that bears no fruit He cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes to make it bear more' (John 15:1-2 NJB) Also mentioned in the Song of Solomon: 'the fragrant grape vines are blossoming. Rise up my darling! Come away with me, my fair one!' (Song of Solomon 2:13, NLT)





Hyssop (mentioned in 10 places in the Old Testament and 2 places in the New Testament - the plant or part of it formed an important part of Passover: '*take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some blood on the top and both sides of the door*' frame' Exodus 12:22a NIV). Mentioned other times as a purifying plant, including by David in Psalms and in the New Testament in relation to ceremonial cleansing. Also mentioned by Solomon: '*He described plant life, from the Cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the walls*' (I Kings 4:33a NIV). Syrian hyssop (*Origanum syriacum*) may be the plant mentioned in the Bible. Also mentioned in relation to the sponge of vinegar held up to Jesus on the cross: '*put the sponge on a stalk of hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus's lips*' (John 19:29, NIV) in some versions there is also mention of a cane or reed.

Ivy (*Hedera helix*) is found only in the Apocrypha, its use was proscribed by Jews & early Christians (Musselman 2007 suggests this is because it was associated with the rite of the Greek god Dionysius and the wreaths of Apollo). A passage in Maccabees tells that the Jews were forced to wear ivy wreaths and take part in the Dionysian celebrations.

Laurel (*Laurus nobilis*) found only in the New Testament (Paul, Peter, James) as the best candidate for wreaths associated with victory and Greek culture

Lily of the Field - one of the most famous images of the Bible: '*Why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. Yet I tell you not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these*' (Matthew 6:28-30 NIV) Musselman (2007) thinks it is not *Lilium candidum* but suggests three possibilities, the crown anemone (*Anemone coronaria*), the field poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*) or that it is not a specific plant but refers to any of the beautiful plants of God's creation.

Mint (*Mentha spp*) used as part of the list of tithe plants in the tirade against the Pharisees' lack of justice (Luke 11:42 & Matthew 23:23)

Mulberry (*Morus nigra* and *Morus spp*) - silk is mentioned, but also the drink of mulberry berries, like the one given to the elephants before battle (I Maccabees 6:34) NJB). It may have been a local species of *Morus* during Biblical times.

Mustard (*Brassica nigra*, *Sinapsis arvensis*, *S. alba* or *S. juncea*)- in the New Testament mustard seed is used as a symbol of something tiny that can grow into something very large.

Nettle (*Urtica pilulifera*) - used in several places to indicate neglect and bad management, although there is some dispute about the exact identification

Oak (the Biblical species are *Quercus calliprinos* & *Q. ithaburensis*), they are used in the Bible to imply strength: '*Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them, he was as tall as the cedars, as strong as the oaks*' (Amos 2:9a NJB). Musselman (2007) also points out that acorns have a long history as a food plant in the region. Many of the oak forests of the Middle East have been cut down: '*Wail, oaks of Bashan, the dense forest has been cut down!*' (Zechariah 11:2b)



Onion (*Allium cepa*) - mentioned in the list of vegetables missed by the children of Israel in the desert (Numbers 11:5)

Pine (*Pinus halepensis, Pinus calabrensis, Pinus pinea*)- there are problematic translations of pine in the Bible, it may be that none of them explicitly refer to pine. However pitch is mentioned several times including in the construction of Noah's ark and Moses' basket and this came from pine.

Plane (*Platanus orientalis*) - again, the translation of this tree is problematic, it may occur in two places - the story of Jacob feeding mottled branches to goats (Genesis 30:37-39), and the King of Egypt being compared to the strong boughs of the plane tree (Ezekiel, 31:8, NJB).

Reed (*Phragmites australis* & spp) Musselman (2007) believes that the marshes of Babylon mentioned in the wars of Babylon (Jeremiah 51:31-32) would have had large stands of reed.

Rose (*Rosa* spp, *Rosa phoenicia* in the Levant) - often mistranslated in the Bible to refer to any attractive plant. The Rose of Sharon is probably not a rose.

Rose of Sharon - the identity of this plant is not clear, rose, tulip, daffodil have all been suggested. Based on the ecology of the Plain of Sharon Musselman (2007) believes that the Rose of Sharon may be a gladiolus (*Gladiolus italicus* & *G. atroviolaceus*)

Rue (*Ruta graveolens* - *Ruta chalepensis* in Bible areas) - used as part of the list of tithe plants in the tirade against the Pharisees' lack of justice (Luke 11:42 & Matthew 23:23)

Tares (a weed of cultivation, not specifically identified but could be *Lolium temulentum* or *Cephalaria syriaca* (Musselman 2007). The tares are mentioned in the famous parable in Matthew 13:24-30

Thistle (In Bible regions these could be *Echinops* sp, *Onopordum* spp, *Silybim* spp, *Atractylis* spp - in Britain, thistles could be *Cirsium* spp, *Carduus* spp, *Carlina* spp, *Sonchus*, *Onopodum* spp, *Echinops* spp) The thistle is mentioned in Genesis in the expulsion from Eden: 'Cursed is the ground for your sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; (Genesis 3:17-18 KJV)

Walnut (*Juglans regia*) considered to be the nut tree mentioned in the Song of Solomon (Song of Songs 6:11) as part of a sensual garden

Wheat

(*Triticum* spp - would mainly have been emmer wheat in Biblical times *Triticum dicoccum*) - the most important of the six species of the land in Deuteronomy 8:8, used for bread, beer, straw, chaff. There are over 300 references to bread.



Wild Greens - precise identification is not possible, mentioned in Job 30:3-4: '*Haggard from want and hunger, they roamed the parched land in desolate wastelands at night. In the brush they gathered salt herbs, and their food was the root of the broom tree.*'

Musselman (2007) suggests that it could be *Atriplex halimus* (naturalised in Britain). *Atriplex* species have been used as vegetables in many parts of the world.

Willow (*Salix spp*) Musselman considers that the famous willows of Babylon where the Jews hung their harps (giving rise to the scientific name of the weeping willow *Salix babylonica*) were actually poplars (*Populus euphratica*). Willows are mentioned in other places - in the feast of shelters (Leviticus 23:40), for shelter (Job 40:22), in the crossing of the Ravine of Willows or Poplars (Isaiah 15:7).

Wormwood (probably *Artemisia spp* including *A. herba-alba* although the identification is not certain) - mentioned as part of a bitter drink in Jeremiah (9:15 & 23:15) and as a star called Wormwood in Revelation 8:11

The following plants are mentioned in the Bible but either do not grow in the UK at all or are found only in gardens.

Acacia (*Acacia albida*, *A. nilotica*, or *A. raddiana*) - used as wood in the tabernacle, and the Ark of the Covenant

Aloeswood (*Aquilaria malaccensis*), Barley, Beans, Black Cumin, Broom (*Retama raetam*), Cane (*Arundo donax*), Caper (*Capparis spinosa*), Carob (*Ceratonia siliqua*), Cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum*), Cotton, Crown of Thorns (more likely *Sarcopoterium spinosum* (spiny burnet) rather than Christ thorn (*Ziziphus spina-christi*), Cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens* - not naturalised in Britain) - used as building wood and mentioned as being part of the forest - some controversy as to identification) - Date Palm, Ebony, Frankincense, Galbanum (*Ferula spp?*), Ginger (in Qu'ran but not Bible), Gourd, Henna (*Lawsonia inermis*), Ladanum (*Cistus* species), Leek, Lentil, Mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*), Myrrh (*Commiphora spp*), Myrtle (*Myrtus communis*) connected with the feast of the Tabernacle, Nard (*Nardostachys jatamansi*) used as an expensive perfume plant (Mary washes Christ's feet with it, and it is mentioned in the Song of Solomon), Olive (*Olea europaea*), Papyrus, Pistachio, Pomegranate, Saffron (*Crocus sativus*), Sycamore (*Ficus sycomorus*) (this is the tree that the tax-collector Zacchaeus climbed to see Jesus), Tamarisk, Terebinth, Thornbush (*Ziziphus spina-christi*), Thyine (*Tetraclinis articulate*) a luxury wood, Tumbleweed (*Gundelia tournefortii*), Watermelon

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