

# Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson  
Pocahontas County Naturalist



December 5, 2018

"On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." Matthew 2:11

As we enter the Advent Season and prepare for Christmas, let's take a closer look at some of the many gifts of the Christmas Season. After all, that's what Christmas is all about, right? Having just survived Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, and Cyber Monday, it's pretty apparent we live in a culture that has commercialized the season. Today let's encounter the original Christmas gifts, given to the baby Jesus by the Wisemen from the East.

Gold, though not plentiful, is still familiar to most of us. As we learned in chemistry class, gold is designated on the Periodic Chart as element Au, atomic weight of 79, and in its purest form is a bright, slightly reddish yellow in color and a dense, soft, malleable, and ductile metal. Throughout history, gold has been valued in the worlds of art and finance. Did you know flakes of gold have been discovered in paleolithic caves dating 40,000 years ago? Many people believe the Magi's gift of gold to the Holy Family was both practical, perhaps financing their hasty trip to Egypt and Joseph's small carpentry business start-up, but also spiritual as a symbol of the baby's future kingship.

Frankincense, the second gift, is actually a tree resin that has been traded for over 5,000 years. The fragrant, milky white resin is collected from *Boswellia* trees that grow in East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. These small trees grow to about 16 feet in height with papery bark, sparse branches of paired leaves, and white flowers. Like gold, frankincense was both a practical gift, to be used as an anointing oil for the baby, and a spiritual symbol. Often burned as an incense, frankincense smoke represents the prayers of the people rising to heaven and the baby's future role as high priest.

The third gift, myrrh, is also a tree resin. Myrrh has been harvested for over 6,000 years from *Commiphora* trees that also grow in the Near East. These small, thorny trees have spiny branches, sparse leaves in groups of three, and a height of 9 feet. The reddish resin, used in perfumes, medicines, and incense, is also an embalming oil and often portrayed as the spiritual symbol of Christ's death. Myrrh also has healing properties as an antiseptic, analgesic, and anti-inflammatory and perhaps was given as practical medicine for the family as well.

The processes for collecting frankincense and myrrh are the same. Workers make cuts in the tree trunks to release the gum resin in the bark which then oozes out and drips down the tree trunk. The tear-shaped droplets are left on the bark for two weeks before being collected by hand.

Will the original Christmas gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh be given in your family this year?

