

Making Infused Oils and Salves with Resins and Resinous Herbs **by Patricia Kyritsi Howell, RH (AHG)**

One of my winter projects this year has been to experiment until I found the best way to make salves using resins and resinous herbs. I used mastic resin and the highly resinous buds of Balm of Gilead. I bought the mastic on my last trip to Greece, where it is a common flavoring in sweets and pastries and a medicine. I collected the Balm of Gilead buds last spring from a fallen balsam poplar or *Populus balsamifera* tree

About Balm of Gilead

Last spring I got a call from my friend Helen telling me that a huge balsam poplar had fallen on her farm and she thought I might like to gather the buds before they burned it. When I got there I was overwhelmed by the huge number of buds that crowded the branches, and the hundreds of honey bees that arrived before me. Resin oozed from the tiny buds and before long the fingers of my gloves were sticking together. I picked buds for a very long time as I knew this was a rare opportunity to gather a large quantity of these buds. Helen had given me a treasure!

Normally my only source of Balm of Gilead buds comes from the buds that drop to the ground from a tree near my house. Crawling on my hands and knees I hunt for buds hidden in the leaf mulch of the forest floor.

The resin is an ancient topical remedy. Its actions are analgesic, anti-inflammatory, anti-rheumatic and anti-bacterial. It is used to treat wounds and infections, and to relieve arthritic pain and stiffness. The dried buds also make wonderful incense. On special occasions, I burn them on charcoal

Making Balm of Gilead Salve

This method is much more complicated, very messy and a lot of trouble. As soon as I collected the Balm of Gilead buds (wearing latex gloves) they formed a big, sticky, gooey clump reminiscent of caramel corn left in a car on a hot day. I managed to cram the entire harvest into a large, wide-mouthed canning jar and covered it completely with grain alcohol. This jar sat around on the porch all summer getting an occasional shake and not much more until winter when I strained the out the buds (ruining a pressing cloth and getting a thick coat of resin on everything). The result was a fragrant, brown alcohol extract of Balm of Gilead.

Next I had to separate the resin from the alcohol extract. The theory is that by combining the alcohol extract with a fixed oil (1 part alcohol extract to 2 parts vegetable oil) and carefully warming the mixture, the alcohol will gradually evaporate leaving behind the resin-infused oil.

When I first combined the alcohol and oil in a saucepan, the colors of the two liquids were distinctly separate. I stirred the mixture, keeping the heat low and even. The smell of alcohol was very strong. I suddenly realized that I had no idea how long it would take for the alcohol to completely evaporate. I checked all my written sources; none of the authors mentioned this important detail. I kept stirring and sniffing.

I estimate that the evaporation process took about an hour. The alcohol smell gradually faded as the mixture, eventually became evenly brown. I removed the oil from the heat. Then I made a standard salve using beeswax.

As I poured the salve into jars I notice a dark, chocolate brown residue at the bottom of the pan. To reserve the brown residue, I poured carefully to keep it in the bottom of the pan. I poured the residue into the last jar. Later I noticed that this jar of salve was more fragrant than the others but its appearance was not as pleasing due to the strange brown stuff at the bottom.

About Mastic Resin

Mastic is a resin collected from *Pistacia lentiscus*, an evergreen tree in the Pistachio family that is native to the Greek Island of Chios. The 20 foot tree usually lives for about 100 years. Resin is collected about 5 to 6 years. Cuts are made in the bark so that the trees 'cry' tears, or resin, which is collected with special knives. Mastic collection on Chios is carefully managed by cooperative of local landowners, many of whom have been mastic farmers for generations. The aromatic resin is sun dried into translucent drops or tears. It is graded according to the size of the tears. Once it dries the resin is very stable and powders easily.

Chios mastic has a long history of use as a spice and medicine. Used topically, it is antibacterial, antifungal and vulnerary. Mastic is a prized ingredient in facial creams and cosmetics as it stimulates cellular rejuvenation and restores dried skin. Its ability to heal the skin is remarkable.

The resin is also chewed to sweeten the breath, to treat sore throats and gum disease. In Greece mastic is a popular flavoring in candy, liqueur, and toothpaste.

Making Mastic Salve

Making an infused oil of mastic resin is simple. I ground the mastic tears into a fine powder using a mortar and pestle. I put 1 teaspoon of mastic powder to 6 ounces of olive oil in a small saucepan and heated the mixture over low heat. If it is added all at once the mastic powder likes to form a gooey mass in the bottom of the pan. While if you continue to stir the hot oil, the mass will eventually dissolve, it is easier to sprinkle the mastic powder into the warm oil a little at a time while stirring continuously (just like making lump-free polenta).

Once the resin has completely dissolved into the oil, let it brew for about 30 minutes, keeping the flame low and stirring occasionally. The mastic infused oil is now ready to be transformed into a salve by adding beeswax at a ratio of 1 tablespoon of grated beeswax per 8 ounces oil.

I hope this inspires you to make some resin-based salves. If you want to give me any feedback on your experiments or suggestions for how to make this process even better, I'd love to hear from you.