

General

The terebinth tree (*Pistacia atlantica*) belongs to the cashew family (*Anacardiaceae*), which comprises about 60 genera. The genus *Pistacia*, which includes the terebinth tree, comprises about eleven species, mainly distributed in the Mediterranean area and Asia, but also in Mexico and southern USA, Atlantic Islands and East Tropical Africa. In Cyprus, the species *Pistacia atlantica* (terebinth tree), *P. terebinthus* (terebinth) and *P. lentiscus* (mastic tree, lentisk) are indigenous, whereas *P. vera* (pistachio) is cultivated for its edible fruits, the well known pistachios.

Nomenclature: The genus name, *Pistacia*, derives from the ancient Greek pistaki, which was used for pistachio (*Pistacia vera*). The specific epithet, *atlantica*, derives from the Atlas mountains in Algeria.



Characteristic terebinth tree

Description

The terebinth tree is a robust deciduous tree with a broad crown, which can reach a height of 15 m. Mature trees have a massive trunk, covered with fissured, greyish-brown bark. The leaves are compound, 10-20 cm long and 5-12 cm wide. They are composed of a central axis (rachis) which bears 3-5 pairs of lateral leaflets and one terminal leaflet (imparipinnate). The leaflets are lanceolate, 3-7 cm long, glabrous and have a characteristic smell when crushed. Along the rachis there is a narrow but distinct wing, a characteristic that distinguishes it from *Pistacia terebinthus* (terebinth). The flowers are unisexual; males and females are arranged in branched inflorescences in the axils of the leaves; they are brownish-green and are born from February to April. The male inflorescences at first are very compact and dense, becoming looser at maturity; female inflorescences are lax and have a short peduncle.

The fruit is an ovate or suborbicular drupe, 6-7 mm in diameter, at first red, bluish-green at maturity. Drupes ripen from September to December.



Branch with leaves and fruits

Distribution - Habitat

In Cyprus, the terebinth tree is distributed from sea level up to an altitude of 1500 m. Usually, it occurs in abandoned fields, field margins and rocky slopes; it is also frequent in oak woodlands and maquis vegetation. Very often it is found in yards of old houses, especially villages of the Pafos district, and near chapels. Single trees or groups of trees occur in the Akamas peninsula, in Pafos and Lemesos districts, at Kiti village and elsewhere. Furthermore, it can be found as a cultivated tree in parks and roadside plantations, such as along Lefkosia-Lemesos highway. The terebinth tree is found throughout the East Mediterranean and eastwards to Caucasus and western Pakistan, also in North Africa and the Atlantic islands.

The terebinth tree thrives in all types of soils and it is easily propagated by seed.



Distribution map

History - Uses

The terebinth tree yields the well-known «pafitiki pissa» (i.e., Pafos chewing gum), a local resin. Dioscorides says: «While it is true that the resin obtained from terebinth was brought to Petra from Arabia, it is also made in Judea, Syria and Cyprus ... which, of course, is different because it is clear, white, glossy in colour and bluish, fragrant, giving off a smell of Terebinth» (*De materia medica* 1.71).

In Cyprus, the fruits are used to make «tremithopittes» (terebinth pies); in some places the fruits are eaten either dry or roasted. Furthermore, in the Pafos district the fruits were used to extract «tremitheleo» (terebinth oil) which was used for cooking. The purple-red autumn foliage, the fruits, and the greyish-brown bark make it suitable for ornament, especially as a single tree in roadside plantations and gardens. Its wood is utilised as firewood.

The names of two villages (Tremithoua) of the Pafos district, as well as many place-names (tremithas, tremithos etc.) derive from «tremithos», the common Cypriot name of *Pistacia atlantica*.

Conservation and Management

In Cyprus, throughout the distribution range of the terebinth tree there are few, small and sparse stands, mainly on private land. However, there are many single trees, especially in the southwest part of the island. Generally, the species is threatened by human activities, such as expansion of built-up areas and cultivation, road construction and improvement and to a lesser extent felling and possibly grazing.

The Forestry Department, in an attempt to protect the species, has located many old and large terebinth trees, which have been designated as *tree monuments*. In Cyprus, five terebinth trees are protected. The largest terebinth tree, with a girth of 8.6 m at breast height (1.3 m), is found at Polis Chrysochous, whereas the oldest, with an estimated age of about 1500 years, is found at Apesia village. In addition, protected terebinth trees are found at Simou, Kritou Marottou and Limnatis villages, while protected groups of trees at Empa and Kiti villages.



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Tree of the year 2005

Terebinth tree - *Pistacia atlantica*



Giant terebinth tree at Panagia Angeloktisti (Kiti village)



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