



Artwork by John Thompson

Gum Elemi

SCIENTIFIC NAME
Bursera simaruba

FAMILY
Burseraceae

OTHER NAMES

Gummalamme, Kammalamme, Gumbo Limbo, Tourist Tree, Turpentine Tree, West Indian Birch, Birch Gum

DESCRIPTION

Gum elemi ranges from a bush to large trees over 15 meters in height. The trunk is a reddish brown that peels off in thin layers. New growth is more greenish. The leaves are arranged in an alternating fashion and are compound ranging from 3 to 9 leaflets. Gum elemi is a deciduous tree, losing its leaves entirely for a very short period in February or March.

HABITAT AND DISTRIBUTION

Gum elemi occurs in Coppice on both a limestone and sand substrate. It is a common species throughout the islands of the Bahamas and is also found in the Pine woodlands. Gum Elemi occurs on all islands of the Bahamas as well as Florida, the Caribbean, and Central and South America.

REPRODUCTION

The small, greenish-white flowers appear before the new leaves sprout during the spring in multiple branches. Plants produce both male and female flowers. The fruit is a berry that turns red-brown in colour with three white seeds inside.

USES AND IMPORTANCE

Gum elemi is commonly used throughout its range. The resin of the Burseraceae Family is known for its anti-inflammatory properties and is particularly used in the Bahamas as a treatment of Poison wood (*Metopium toxiferum*) as well as bee and wasp stings. Within the Bahamas it is also used medicinally to treat circulatory

problems as well as in strengthening and aphrodisiac teas. The soft wood has been used to craft certain items such as toy boats. Throughout its range it is propagated as an ornamental and used to make living fence poles due to its ability to grow from cuttings of the trunks.

Like many plants in the Bahamas, Gum elemi holds great importance as it provides food for many birds.

INTERESTING FACTS

In the Bahamas there are two related species: the endemic Frenning's Gum elemi (*Bursera frennigae*); and the Inagua Gum elemi (*Bursera inaguensis*), or Boar Gum elemi. Both occurring on the southern islands.

When the leaves are crushed they give off an aromatic scent.