

# Religion, spiritual meaning and traditions associated with succulents

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Religions of many faiths have links with succulent plants, some dating back thousands of years. Although some links are perhaps tenuous they are of interest nevertheless, and examples from around the world are discussed. Photography by the authors except where otherwise stated.

**M**y son Graham was taken to many cactus meetings when he was young. However, this early introduction did not have a lasting impact. Today he has what I would call a distant interest in these plants but he does own a nice cristate form of *Trichocereus pachanoi*, currently growing happily indoors on a sunny windowsill (Fig. 1). In habitat, the normal form of this plant is a branched, columnar cactus that is native to the arid and semi-arid areas in the Andean region of South America (Fig. 2). I was explaining to Graham the link between the Christian saint, Peter, and this plant. Peter incidentally is also my son's middle name. The plant is also known as the San Pedro cactus, or St Peter's cactus. It is believed that St Peter holds the keys to heaven and that by drinking the boiled cactus extract, users can reach it while still on earth. Previously the shamans of the Andean tribes used the plant for traditional medicines and religious divination for thousands of years. Plants with four ribs, compared to the usual six to eight, are highly valued and are believed to have special powers as each rib corresponds to one of the 'four winds'. These four winds are considered to be supernatural powers associated with the four cardinal directions.

From this conversation, we decided to research other links between succulents or semi-succulents and religion that might form the basis of an article. In the Bible for example there are references to 139 plants or related terms, but perhaps not surprisingly

there are few examples of what we term succulents. The first biblical reference that arguably relates to succulents says: "Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the plants of the field" (Genesis 3:17–18). The opening chapters of Genesis take place in the Garden of Eden which some biblical scholars suggest may have been in the area known today as the Tigris-Euphrates river valley in Western Asia. Although it is unclear which plant is referenced above, one perhaps tenuous candidate might be *Euphorbia milii* (Fig. 3). The plant has small yellow flowers with showy red bracts that appear in the spring and summer and was introduced to the Middle East before the time of Christ. Legend associates the Christ thorn plant with the crown of thorns worn by Jesus Christ. Certainly, the stems are armed with thorns, and are pliable and can be intertwined into a circle. *E. milii* is originally from Madagascar and the actual plant in the Bible is possibly one of the local-growing thorny shrubs, although Arab dhows trading from



Fig. 1 San Pedro cactus, *Trichocereus pachanoi* cristate



Fig. 2 San Pedro cactus, a clump of *Trichocereus pachanoi*

Madagascar via East Africa (present day Tanzania) could easily have transported the plant to the Middle East.

The succulent plant *Tinospora fragosa*, commonly known as Aaron's rod or Moses's staff, grows in the dry subtropical regions of southern Africa. Its other common name, 'wonder plant', derives from the plant's vegetative survival ability, as a cut piece can form new roots in just a short time. It is recognised by grey-green, thick, fleshy stems bearing heart-shaped leaves. Parts of the plant are boiled and used locally as a therapeutic bath for rheumatism by Limpopo farmers. The name Aaron's rod was given by these people as the plant reminded them of the biblical verses in Numbers 17:1-8 where the Israelites disputed the leadership of Aaron. In the Old Testament Aaron's rod refers to staves carried by Moses's brother Aaron, the first priest of Israel. The Bible tells how Aaron's rod was endowed with miraculous power during the Plagues of Egypt. The Lord asked Moses to obtain staves from all their chiefs according to their fathers' houses and write their names on each. The next day Moses found that the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossom and ripe almonds. For this example, the anecdote ends, as the biblical Aaron's rod was probably obtained from an almond tree, *Prunus dulcis*, a known hardwood.



Fig. 3 Christ thorn plant, *Euphorbia milii*

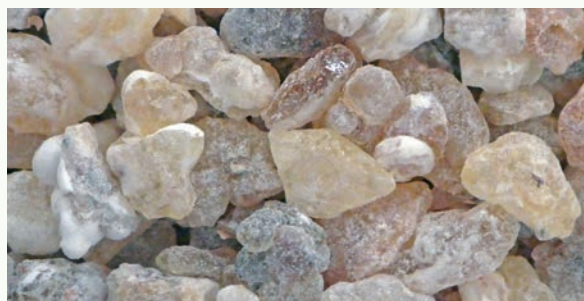


Fig. 4 Frankincense resin, extracted from *Boswellia frereana*, northern Somalia



Fig. 5 Myrrh granules, extracted from *Commiphora myrrha*, Somalia

Moving on to the New Testament, in the book of Matthew, there is a well-known reference to succulents: “Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh” (Matthew 2:11). Frankincense (Fig. 4) has been extracted from species of *Boswellia* for thousands of years and is valued for its aromatic properties when burnt. There are about 30 accepted species in the genus *Boswellia*, and some produce an oily resin in sufficient quantity to be extracted (eg *B. frereana*). Frankincense is used in many countries and particularly where Hinduism forms part of daily ritual worship. However, today the natural ingredient is largely replaced with a synthetic chemical. Myrrh is a reddish-coloured resin obtained from the dried sap of the spiny shrub, *Commiphora myrrha* (Fig. 5). This substance has been used in ancient and classical times, for example in Egypt for embalming the bodies of Pharaohs, and its use in incense has been part of Catholic liturgy since the early days of the church. The first mention of myrrh in the Bible was as a principal ingredient in the holy anointing oil prescribed by God (Exodus 30:23), with several references occurring later. Many species from this genus have an exfoliating bark and produce aromatic oleoresins, but historically *C. erythraea* is believed to have been the primary source of myrrh. The change from using one species as the main source of myrrh to another might be linked to the limited natural growth range and the need today to cultivate adequate plants to meet worldwide demand. Other plants like the example above occur in many religions including Hinduism and Islam. For example, in Hinduism the dried resin from *Commiphora wightii* or guggul is burnt as dhoop (incense cones) during religious ceremonies for their gods and goddesses to ward off evil spirits. The gum extract has been used widely in the Indian subcontinent as part of their herbal heritage to treat abscesses, diarrhoea, obesity, seizures and thrombosis.

The Bodo people are an ethnic and aboriginal group of the Brahmaputra valley from the north-east of India. Plants have formed an important part of their socio-cultural and religious beliefs. Historically, the sijwu plant, *Euphorbia milii* var. *splendens*, was taken as the symbol of Bathouism and worshipped, but today followers affiliate their beliefs to



Fig. 6 Peyote, *Lophophora williamsii*

Hinduism. *Euphorbia neriiifolia* is an erect shrub which probably originated from south-east Asia, but is today cultivated in many countries. The plant has several common names but in the context of this article, ‘holy milk hedge’ is the most appropriate. It is used in worship to please Shiva the Hindu god of destruction and restoration, and is potted on roof tops where it is believed to protect homes from lightning strikes. The plants are surrounded by a round fence of



Fig. 7 Saguaro, *Carnegiea gigantea* flower (Photo: Bill Christie)

bamboo strips and prayers are offered to their gods. This plant also has a long history of medicinal uses in Ayurvedic medicine. Leaves and their latex were used to relieve earache, and nowadays the juice of the root is considered a diuretic and purgative, and is used to treat asthma, colds and stomach ailments.

The sacred fig or peepal tree, *Ficus religiosa*, is native to the Indian subcontinent, and it is believed that Siddhartha Gautama, the spiritual teacher later known as Gautama Buddha, achieved enlightenment under this tree. The Brahma Purana and the Padma Purana are gods in the Hindu triumvirate and, according to legend, when demons defeated the gods, Vishnu hid in the peepal tree. Hindus can therefore worship this god at these trees without needing his actual image or a temple. Similarly, the Bengal fig or banyan, *Ficus benghalensis*, is considered sacred to Buddhists and Hindus and is one of the most venerated trees in India. For Hindus the leaves of this tree are said to be the resting place for the god Krishna. Both fig trees are considered sacred and the property of their gods, and

this self-sustaining practice has played an indirect but vital role in forest conservation.

After the Spanish conquest of Mexico the Roman Catholic Church tried to suppress the use of mescaline derived from *Lophophora williamsii*, although it did not raise objections to the plant. In 1918, the religion known as Peyotism (or the Peyote Religion) started in the native American church located in Utah, USA, and incorporates religious influences combining Christian and various native American traditions. The word peyote derives from the Nahuatl name 'peyotl' meaning 'caterpillar silk' which is linked with the small, spineless *L. williamsii* (Fig. 6). Technically there are hundreds of trichomes in each axillary bud, but no spines. This plant and particularly the crown contains psychoactive alkaloids, especially mescaline, and extracts from the plant are central to this religion and are used to reinforce feelings of social belonging. Peyote, consumed in the ritual context, it is said, enables the individual to commune with gods and the spirits (including those of the departed) in contemplation and vision and so to

receive from them spiritual healing, power, guidance and reproof.

The iconic saguaro cactus, *Carnegiea gigantea*, grows in the Sonoran Desert of south-eastern California, southern Arizona and north-western Mexico. The saguaro blossom is Arizona's state wildflower and one of a few plants protected under state law (Fig. 7). Saguaros are culturally important to the Tohono O'odham Nation. These indigenous native Americans known as the 'Desert people' live today in reservations in southern Arizona and worship the Earth maker (Tcuwut makai), whose sacred home is in a cave below the base of Baboquivari Peak in southern Arizona. These people also harvest ripe saguaro fruit in the spring to make jams,



Fig. 8 Organ pipe cactus, *Stenocereus thurberi* in habitat (Photo: Ken Lund [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons)

jellies and wines. The 'Nawait' or saguaro wine is drunk at their most sacred ritual, the new year's rain ceremony, that encourages the spirits to bring the rain that makes this fruit possible.

The organ pipe cactus, *Stenocereus thurberi*, is native to Mexico and limited areas of the United States (Fig. 8). In the Mexican state of Sonora, it is known as pitaya or pitahaya dulce. The pitaya fruit was harvested by native people well before contact with Europeans. Visiting Jesuit missionaries were against the natives' liking of these fruits, but actions to restrain consumption did little to halt the pitaya celebrations. The priests, it appears, had failed to recognise their inextricable relationship with the harvest. In north-west Mexico at an old mining town of La Aduana one *S. thurberi* has special significance. The sacred plant, now over 3m in height, grows from the middle of the church wall. The faithful believe that the Virgin Mary appears between the branches and, during the annual festival of Balderrana in November, thousands of pilgrims arrive to pay homage and conduct a vigil in the hope of a vision of the Virgin. The event is an undoubtable inspiration to those who believe.

In Mexico, the national flag shows a coat of arms that contains an eagle, a serpent and an opuntiad. At first glance the latter might be interpreted as a symbol of the numerous cacti present in the country, but some believe its origins come from an Aztec legend dating to the 13th century. Their gods stated they should build a city where they spotted an eagle on a cactus eating a serpent. Legend states that the cactus grew from the heart of Copil, son of Huitzilopochtli's sister Malinalxochitl, which had been flung into Lake Texcoco. Guided by these prophecies an island on the lake was selected and here the building of the city of

Tenochtitlán was started, which is known today as Mexico City.

The poinsettia, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, was discovered in 1828 by John Poinsett, who was at the time the United States Ambassador to Mexico. Plants were sent back to South Carolina where they were propagated and today are a commercially important species. However, the plant has religious symbolism in Christianity as the star-shaped leaf pattern is said to symbolise the Star of Bethlehem, and the red colour to represent the blood sacrificed by Jesus at the crucifixion. The plants also have an association with Christmas which probably began in 16th century Mexico where the story of Pepita was told. Pepita was poor and could not offer a gift for the celebration of Jesus's birthday, so an angel encouraged her to gather weeds from the roadside and place them in front of the church altar. Crimson blossoms sprouted from the weeds and became today's poinsettias. Later in the 17th century, Franciscan friars in Mexico involved the plants in their Christmas celebrations.



Fig. 9 Joshua tree, *Yucca brevifolia* in habitat (Photo: Robb Hannawacker [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons)



Fig. 10 Rosary bead plant, *Senecio rowleyanus* (Photo: Alexey Sergee, Doha, Qatar)

The Joshua tree, *Yucca brevifolia* (Fig. 9), is the largest of the yuccas and is from the Mojave Desert, North America. This plant was named after the biblical prophet Joshua. Folk legend traces the name to the Mormon settlers in the 19th century who observed the trees' gnarled and outstretched branches leading the settlers forward. This could compare to several instances where the biblical figure Joshua lifted his arms upward (eg Joshua 8:12). Other sources note the conception of the American West as a promised land for many religious settlers, suggesting that the name Joshua was given to these distinct trees, since Joshua was Moses's successor in leading the biblical Israelites to their own promised land.

Finally, a few other plants noticed during the research for this article are worthy of mention. Firstly, the genus *Schlumbergera* which was erected by Charles Lemaire in 1858. These plants are recognised widely as the Christmas cactus, according to their flowering season, and are evidently a relatively modern trend in that they are used as gifts during this period. The plant body is flattened, there are few spines and the stems appear to be leaves, however it is only the name that has any religious connotation.

Similarly, *Crassula* 'Buddha's Temple' is only connected with any religion due to the shape of the plant. The original plant is a nursery-produced cultivar from 1959, a result of a cross between *Crassula pyramidalis* and *C. perfoliata* var. *minor*. Staying with shape, the so-called Buddha belly plant, *Jatropha podagrica*, is also allied only by its name and has no religious connection to Buddha. The plant has several

medicinal uses including as a diuretic and purgative. In many collections, *Astrophytum myriostigma* remains a popular plant for its globe shape with speckling, white scales and flecks. The genus originates from the Greek word for 'star plant', but is commonly known as the bishop's cap, bishop's hat or monk's hood cactus. The religious connection is merely in the names.

The rosary bead plant (also known as string of pearls), *Senecio (Curio) rowleyanus*, comes from a single clone from the 1950s (Fig. 10), but the use of 'prayer beads' originates from the earliest days of the church and has roots in pre-Christian times. Their use has been taken up

by members of various religions including Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism. Finally, *Hoya compacta*, which is a draping succulent vine and one of many tropical plants belonging to the Apocynaceae. Common names include angel rope and Hindu rope plant and again no connections to any religion or legends could be found. Maybe we should just enjoy this plant and grow it for its light but pleasurable fragrance.

This brief visit to the religious and cultural links to succulent plants, unsubstantiated or otherwise, has highlighted some interesting associations which we hope you have found of interest.

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