



BOXTREE

BOXTREE, *Buxus* L. spp., *šemšād*, common name for numerous species of evergreen shrubs or trees of the family Buxaceae.

The species *B. sempervirens* Wall. (= *B. hyrcana* Pojark.), designated as *šemšād-e jangālī* (forest boxtree) in modern Persian botanical terminology (see Ghahreman, III, no. 160), grows wild in lowland or plain forests of the Caspian provinces of Gīlān (including Ṭavāleš), Māzandarān, and Gorgān (ibid.; Pārsā, IV, p. 1284; Rechinger, 1966, pp. 3-4; Ṭābetī, pp. 167-68), where it forms (especially in Nūr and Kojūr areas) dense groves or constitutes the undergrowth of *Quercus castaneaefolia*, maple, and silk tree associations (Ṭābetī, loc. cit.). It sometimes grows to a height of 10 m and a girth of 50 cm (ibid., Sā'ī, I, p. 177, indicates 8-10 m as usual maximum height and 25 cm as maximum viable circumference). It is also grown as an ornamental evergreen border or hedge plant. Local names reported by these authors and others include *šemšād*, *šūmšād* (Āstārā), *kīš* (Gīlān, Ṭavāleš), *šūšār*, *šīšār* (Rūdsar, Rāmsar, Šahsavār; in Sā'ī, loc. cit.: *šūšād*, *šīšād*), *šār*, *šar* (Nūr, Šīrgāh), *šahr* (Kojūr, Āmol; cf. *Ḥodūd al-'ālam*, comp. 372/982, ed. Sotūda, p. 145, concerning the natural and industrial products of Āmol: “and *čūb-e šemšād* [boxwood], which is not found anywhere else in the world”), and *šešār* (Sārī). *Šemšād-e anārī* (lit., “the box looking like a pomegranate shrub”) is the specific name applied by gardeners in Tehran to some varieties of *B. sempervirens* often used by them for hedging flower beds and edging walks in formal gardens (Ṭābetī, loc. cit.).

The *B. sempervirens* yields a valuable wood, which is lemon yellow, fine-



grained, very heavy and hard, and susceptible to a fine polish. This wood was (and, probably to some extent, is) used by local (rural) craftsmen in Iran (especially in Gīlān and Qazvīn) to make such articles as hair combs (for box- and pear-wood comb-making craft, see Wulff, *Crafts*, pp. 99-101), various spoons, ladles (including large sherbet spoons), forks, cigarette-holders, “middles” (*mīānas*) for hookahs, *qand-ə lāks* (in Gīlān, a special round tray with raised edge and a central anvil-like bump, on which loaf or lump sugar is broken into small pieces with a special axe), and fifes (regarding Gīlān, Pāyanda, p. 487, deplors that the boxwood craft, practiced “until several years ago,” has vanished). In 1183/1769-70, ‘Aqīlī Ḳorāsānī, p. 230, s.v. *baqs* (Ar. for *šemsād*), reported that from boxwood “are made thin sheets on which the Qur’ān or other books are written.” Asadī’s statement (*Loġat-e fors*, ed. Eqbāl, pp. 124-25, ed. Mojtabā’ī and Šādeqī, p. 90), that “the *šemsār* [an obsolete variant of *šemsād*] is a hard wood the tree of which is not very tall and from which tools are made for artisans,” indicates the long use of the boxwood in Iran.

In Persian, the word *šemsād* (Mid. Pers. *šemsār/šamsār*, which, according to the *Bundahišn* [TD₂, p. 116.10; ed. and tr. Anklesaria, 16.8, pp. 146-47], like the cypress, the plane-tree, the aspen, the tamarisk, etc., belongs to the category of perennial shrubs and trees which do not yield anything suitable for human food) also designates some deciduous and evergreen shrubs or trees of the genus *Euonymus* L. (= *Evonymus* Tourn.), the spindle tree (family Celastraceae). According to Rechinger (1969, pp. 1-4) and Tābetī (pp. 338-43), this genus is represented in Iran by four native species common in most Caspian forests and in the Arasbārān region (Sā’ī, I, p. 276).

E. europaea L. (= *E. floribundus* Stev. = *E. vulgaris* Mill.) is found in Arasbārān, where it is called *šimšīr* (and probably by the Turkish name *bārūt-āġāji*, lit. “gunpowder wood”), and in Āstārā; also native to the Caucasus and Turkestan; deciduous; it is esteemed for its hard dense wood, from the charcoal of which drawing crayons are made.

E. latifolia (L.) Mill. (= *E. europaeus* L. var. *latifolius* L.); deciduous; habitat: Caspian forests from Arasbārān and Āstārā to Gorgān; also found in the Caucasus; local names include *gīlās-e waḥšī* (in Arasbārān, lit. “wild cherry,” probably an allusion to its pink capsules when ripe; cf. the other name *gūšvārak* below; an unlikely vernacular name for that area, but recorded by



Tābetī, p. 341, and Ghahreman, VIII, no. 938), *sīr-dār* (Ṭāleš), *gūšvāarak* (in Šīrgāh, lit. “the little earring,” probably an allusion to the form of its showy pink dehiscent capsules, growing on long stalks; for pictorial details, see Ghahreman, loc. cit.), and *al(-e) asbī* (Katūl).

E. velutinus (C. A. Mey.) Fisch. et C. A. Mey. (= *E. europaeus* L. var. *velutinus* C. A. Mey.) is native to the Caucasus but is also found in many places in northern Iran, including Āstārā, Nūr, Kojūr, Kalārdašt, Gadūk (Māzandarān), Katūl, Morāva Tappa, and Čenārān pass and Gol(l)īdāg (both in Khorasan); it also grows in Turkmenistan; local names include *gūšvāarak* (Nūr), *sefid-al* (Kalārestāq), *gūš-ḥalqe-‘alaf* (in Katūl, lit. “earring wort”), and *sīa(h)-šen* (Zīārat in Gorgān).

E. verrucosa Scop. is found in Arasbārān and Ḥasanbaglū (North Azarbaijan); it is also reported from the Caucasus and Transcaucasia.

Tābetī (loc. cit.) further mentions the following two exotic but widely cultivated species: 1. *E. japonicus* L. f., the Japanese spindle tree, commonly called *šemšād* or *šemšād-e rasmī* (lit., “standard *šemšād*”), is an evergreen native to Japan and China but was naturalized in Iran long ago as a decorative shrub planted especially for hedges and borders; it occurs in three varieties: *E. japonicus* var. *argento-variegata* Regel (*ablaq-e safīd* “variegated with white”), var. *aureo-variegata* Regel (*ablaq-e zard* “variegated with yellow”), and var. *microphylla* Hort., called *šemšād-e na‘nāī* (mint-like *šemšād*) by gardeners, a dwarf variety with small dark green leaves, often planted as border evergreen for flower beds. 2. *E. patens* Rehd. (= *E. sieboldiana* Hort.), a climbing evergreen native to China. (For other species of *Evonymus* growing in some territories adjacent to Iran, see Rechinger, loc. cit.).

Some botanical features of the *šemšād* have been used by classical Persian poets in similes and metaphors connected with the stature and hair of their object of praise (*mamdūḥ*) or (often imaginary) sweetheart (*ma‘šūq*). Considering that the *šemšād* typically has many branchy stems and a generally shaggy habit, the comparison of the sweetheart’s stature (supposedly erect, svelte, and well balanced) to it (in similes such as *šemšād-tan* “*šemšād*-bodied” and *šemšād-bālā/-qad* “having a *šemšād*-like stature”; see Deḥḳodā, *Loḡat-nāma*, s.vv.) seems far-fetched (cf. the more artless modern colloquial Persian simile *meṭl-e šāk-e šemšād* “like a *šemšād* branch,” said of a vigorous spruce svelte person). The thick, curly dark hair of the beloved has been compared to



the dense, dark green, shiny foliage of some varieties of *šemšād* (cf. e.g.; Manūčehrī, *Dīvān*, p. 109; “Behold the *šemšād* with such a fine head of hair”; p. 182: “the *šemšād* has assumed the color of the lady’s hair”; and Fakr-al-Dīn Gorgānī, *Viś o Rāmīn*, p. 399: “When I remember thy unfaithfulness, I writhe like thy twin *šemšād*-colored/-looking locks”). Occasionally, the *šemšād*, like the violet (see *banafša*), has served to compare the nascent dark hair on the cheeks, e.g., Farroḳī, *Dīvān*, p. 293: “Hast thou seen a *šemšād*-covered tulip [= rosy face] with a hyacinth crown [= curly dark hair on the head]”; and Neẓāmī Ganjavī (quoted in Dehḳodā, loc. cit.): *hanūz-aš gerd-e gol nārosta šemšād* “the *šemšād* not yet grown around his rose [= rosy cheeks].” (For other literary quotations involving the *šemšād*, see Dehḳodā, loc. cit.).

A now obsolete variant of *šemšād* in New Persian, *šemšār* (cf. the Mid. Pers. and modern dialect forms above), seems to have acquired, by extension, the sense of “fresh, tender twigs of the *šemšād*, with extremely green and delicate leaves, so tender that they bend down and therefore used by poets to compare the hair of the *kūbān* (lovely ones) to them” (*Borhān-e qāṭe*, ed. Mo‘īn, II, p. 1294); a simultaneous use of *šemšād*, i.e., svelte stature, and *šemšār*, i.e., hanging curly hair, is found in a distich by Zaynabī (a contemporary of the Ghaznavids Maḥmūd and Mas‘ūd; quoted by Asadī, ed. Eqbāl, p. 125).

There are also references to the sweet smell of the *šemšād* in connection with a person’s perfumed hair, e.g., *šemšād-e ‘anbarforūš* “ambergris-selling *šemšād*” (Ferdowsī), *šemšād-e būyanda* “odorous *šemšād*” (Asadī), and *šemšād-būy* “having the scent of *šemšād* (Manūčehrī, see Dehḳodā, loc. cit.); in non-literary classical and modern sources the only mention of the fragrance of any kind of *šemšād* is made by Tonokābonī (p. 171) and his commentator, ‘Aqīlī Ḳorāsānī (loc. cit.): “Its leaves are like those of the pomegranate and the myrtle, but smaller and greener . . . ; its blossoms are white and have a strong fragrance (*‘etrīya*), and its seeds are black, resembling those of the myrtle and the pepper.” The poetical allusions to the *šemšād* fragrance, unconfirmed by actual evidence, have led many Persian lexicographers to think that the name *šemšād* was also applied to other aromatic plants, namely, the sweet marjoram (*marzangūš*), a hardy perennial herb, or the myrtle (Pers. *mūrd*, Ar. *ās*), an evergreen shrub with fragrant leaves. There is, indeed, a variety of boxtree bearing some resemblance to the myrtle (namely *B. sempervirens* var. *myrtifolia*), but, as pointed out above, the reference seems to be only to the form and color of the leaves and the seeds (cf. also Fīrūzābādī, I: *baqs/baqsīs* “a tree like the *ās* as to its leaves and grains,” and *baqš* “a tree called *k’ošsāy* in



Persian”; see also Lane, I/1, London, 1863, s.vv.). Probably first imagined by the author of the *Bahār-e ‘Ajam* (compiled in 1152/1739-40; II, p. 175), the identification of the *šemsād* with the *marzangūš* when a darling’s hair is involved has been uncritically repeated by modern lexicographers such as Dehḡodā (s.v. *šemsād-būy*) and M. Mo‘īn (*Farhang-e fārsī*, s.v. *šemsād*). There is no factual evidence for this identification, which may be due to poetical or lexical confusion (cf. *šemsād* in the *Borhān-e qāṭe’*: “an aromatic plant called *marzangūš* and, in Arabic, *ādān al-fa’r*”).

Therapeutic virtues have been attributed to the boxtree only by a few “western” medical and pharmacological authors in the Islamic period (Ebn al-Bayṭār quotes nothing from the Greek masters Dioscorides and Galen, and, except for Bīrūnī, “eastern” authors, such as Rāzī, Ebn Sīnā, Mowaffaq Heravī, and Aḡawaynī Boḡārī, are silent about the boxtree). Ebn al-Bayṭār (pt. 1, p. 103) quotes the following virtues and uses for the *baqs*, which he says the Syrians call *šemsār*: “It is a tree with leaves resembling those of the *ās* . . . Its seeds are black like those of the *ās* and are astringent; if taken internally they constipate the belly and desiccate the moisture in the bowels” (Ebn Ḥassān, i.e., Ebn Joljol, but attributed verbatim to Ṣahārboḡt [b. Māsarjīs] by Bīrūnī, Ar. text, p. 415). “Boxwood sawdust, kneaded with henna and applied on the head, strengthens the hair, is useful against headache, and brings together disjoined cranial sutures (*tafarroq al-šo’ūn*); kneaded with egg white and fine flour and applied on a *waṭī* (a dislocated or injured member without bone fracture), it will be useful to [cure] this [injury]” (from Šarīf Edrīsī) Anṭākī (I, pp. 70-71) and, following him, Tonokābonī (loc. cit.), while expatiating on the preceding indications, have added mainly the following: The boxtree is hot and dry in the second degree. Its seeds desiccate all moistures (*roṭūbāt*), even the running saliva. The thickened decoction of its seeds with wine, if applied on the skin, removes the *ḡomra/bād-e sorḡ* (erysipelas), *namla sā’īa* (staphylococcal pustules? eczema?), and *sa’fa* (psoriasis? ringworm?); mixed with honey and henna and applied on the skin they clear the *āṭār* (scars, blemishes). Combing the hair with combs made of boxwood improves the hair (only in Anṭākī). The topical application of a decoction of box leaves is a proven remedy for anal prolapse. Nowadays probably the only therapeutic use of the boxtree is as a folk medicine in Gīlān and Māzandarān against tapeworms; a dose is about a cupful of the bitter juice extracted from the pounded leaf buds or young leaves (Pāyanda, loc. cit.; however, he warns against an overdose, which would be fatal).



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