

# Piper auritum

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Common Names: Hierba Santa, Hoja Santa, Mexican Pepperleaf, Root Beer Plant, False Kava, Anisillo, Acoyo, Santa Maria, Hoja de Jute, Xmakulan, Tlanecpahquilitl

Family: Piperaceae

Native Range: Southern Mexico to Colombia

*Piper auritum* grows in tropical forests from Mexico to South America and its spicy leaves are used for various culinary and medicinal purposes. The leaves of *P. auritum* contain safrole, which imparts a spicy flavor to its leaves, making it valuable as a seasoning. Safrole is a carcinogen and the same compound that gives sassafras root beer its spicy taste. Plants in the *Piper* genus used as medicinal plants in cultures throughout the world, and pharmacological studies have demonstrated that they contain a variety of bioactive compounds.

## Medical Uses

*Piper auritum* is used for a variety of medicinal purposes in Mexico, Central America and Colombia. The Chinatec in Oaxaca, Mexico brew the leaves to make an infusion that is given to women to facilitate childbirth or stimulate menstrual flow, and the leaf tea is also used as a digestive in Mexico. In Guatemala, a tea of *P. auritum* leaves is used to ease menstrual pain and encourage lactation. The Yucatec Maya apply the leaves of *P. auritum* directly to wounds. In the Antioquia and Chocó departments of Colombia, the leaves are ground to make a poultice used for snakebites. and in El Salvador, the juice of the leaves is used to remove ticks. In Costa Rica, the leaves are applied directly to the head to cure headaches.

Given its wide usage among indigenous groups, *P. auritum* and other plants in the Piper genus have been the subject of several pharmacological studies. This research has indicated antifungal, antibacterial, anti-inflammatory, anti-cancer, antidiabetic, antiulcer, and antiprotozoal properties. The plants essential oil demonstrates antibacterial, insecticidal properties, and is effective as a repellent. A recent study suggests that extracts of *P. auritum* are effective as an anti-venom for snake bites.



#### Culinary Uses

The aromatic, peppery leaves of *P. auritum* are used to season soups, stews, wild meats, and other dishes in Central America and Mexico. In Guatemala, snail soup seasoned with *P. auritum* is considered a delicacy; its local name, Hoja de Jute, reflects this usage. In the Yucatan, the large leaves of the plant are used to season tamales, and may be used as a wrapping for tamales in place of banana leaves or cornhusks. The leaves and stems are also eaten raw in salads. People living along the Río Indio in central Panama use the leaves of *P. auritum* as bait to catch fish. They use the leaves as bait in traps in small pools in the river, and allow the fish to feed on the *P. auritum* leaves for two weeks so that their flesh is seasoned by the flavorful leaves.

