

Tea Tree

Melaleuca alternifolia



The tea tree (*Melaleuca alternifolia*) is a small evergreen that likes warm climates. It is attractive and fragrant, with a definitely exotic look. Herbalists swear by tea tree oil, made from its foliage. For more information on melaleuca tea trees, including tips on growing a tea tree, read on. About

Melaleuca Tea Trees Tea trees are native to the warmer regions of Australia where they grow wild in tropical and subtropical swampy areas. You'll find many different types of tea trees, each with its own dramatic variations in needle and blossom shades. Melaleuca tea trees attract attention in your garden. Tea tree information suggests that one of the most attractive features is the trunk, with its gorgeous, papery bark. If you are thinking of growing a tea tree, note that the tree can get 20 feet (6 m.) tall. It spreads out too, to 10 or 15 feet (3 to 4.5 m.) wide. Be sure to site it with enough room to grow, or else keep the pruners handy. Growing a Tea Tree If you live where the weather is warm, you can plant melaleuca tea trees in your garden. Otherwise, growing a tea tree in a container is a valid alternative. You can position it in outdoor sun during summer, then move it inside for winter.

When you are growing a tea tree, you may be surprised by how fast your tree develops. Tea tree information tells us that Melaleuca tea trees in warm locations can grow several feet (1 to 2 m.) a season. Tea trees in cooler regions won't grow as fast. Your tea tree won't flower until it has been around for a few years. But when it does, you'll notice. The blossoms are frothy, and you'll find a variety of colors available.

How to Care for Tea Trees

When you are learning how to care for tea trees, think warmth. Don't plant *Melaleuca* tea trees outside in your garden unless you live in U.S. Department of Agriculture plant hardiness zone 8 or above. The trees need sun to thrive, whether they are planted indoors or out. They will not be happy in shade. As far as soil goes, make sure it drains easily. The plants just won't thrive if drainage is limited. Grow them in acidic or neutral soil that is moist. Speaking of... don't forget irrigation. Even outdoor plants need watering during dry spells. For those growing a tea tree in a container, regular irrigation is essential. Tea trees are not one of those potted plants that like drying out between drinks. Keep that soil a bit moist at all times.

Tea Tree Uses

Tea Tree uses run from ornamental to medicinal. The small trees are lovely additions to a warm-climate garden and also make a lovely potted plant. The trees also have medicinal uses. Tea Tree uses center around the essential oil obtained from the leaves and twigs. Herbalists consider tea tree oil an important natural antiseptic. The oil can be used for treating stings, burns, wounds, and skin infections. It is said to stimulate the immune system and serves as an effective treatment against both bacterial and fungal infections. The essential oil is also used in aromatherapy.

Tea Tree Oil Benefits

*Also known as **melaleuca oil**. Tea tree oil should not be confused with **tea oil**, the sweet seasoning and cooking oil from pressed seeds of the tea plant *Camellia sinensis* (beverage tea) or the tea oil plant *Camellia oleifera*.*

History

Bundjalung Aborigines who historically resided in what is now known as New South Wales, Australia would pick the leaves from the tea tree plant, break them (like aloe leaves.) Then, to heal burns, cuts, and insect bites they would rub the leaves over their skin. They also ground the leaves into a fine paste as wound dressing. Those crushed leaves were also applied over the body as an insect repellent. They taught Captain Cook how to boil the leaves to create a spiced tea, so Cook called the plant a "tea tree."

In the early 1990s scientists in the University of Western Australia's School of Biomedical, Biomolecular and Chemical Sciences began a study of essential tea tree oil. Their purpose was to investigate and verify the medicinal properties of tea tree oil, especially the oil's antimicrobial benefits. Tea tree oil has demonstrated its wide spectrum of ability in **healing bacterial, fungal, and viral infections** in the laboratory. These researchers have since advocated its acceptance as a topical antimicrobial agent.

Production

Tea tree oil is produced by steam distilling the leaves of the Australian *Melaleuca alternifolia*. The *M. alternifolia* is a plant species which grows only in Australia and is native to Northern New South Wales. Harvesting the leaves from tea trees isn't easy. They grow in swamps infested with snakes and insects. Machinery won't work under those conditions, so the leaves must be **cut by hand**. Workers use machetes to cut suckers off the stumps and then use a cane knife to strip the leaves from the branches. The tea trees' growth appears to actually increase when regularly cropped. No damage is done to the trees or the surrounding ecosystem because machinery can't be used. The leaves are then placed in a steam distiller on racks. Oil is drawn from the leaves, floating on top of the water in collection tanks. The tea tree oil goes through a filtration process before it is poured into a container. As the oil has gained in reputation and popularity, **tea tree plantations have been established where the product is grown organically**.

Composition

The plant oil contains more than 100 separate components. These are mostly monoterpenes, sesquiterpenes, and their alcohol forms. Tea tree oil is comprised of at least 30% terpinen-4-ol which causes most of its antimicrobial activity. This component, with specific levels of 13 others, are required for tea tree oil to meet the International Standard for Oil of Melaleuca.

Medicinal use

Tea tree oil has proven effective in treating **skin infections**. Whether the cause of the infection is bacterial, fungal or viral, the oil works to heal it. Although it provides strong pharmaceutical medication, tea tree oil doesn't show dangerous side effects. This pale yellow or colorless oil smells similar to **eucalyptus**. Although it contains more than 100 compounds, so far only 79 have been specifically identified. Some of these compounds have been found nowhere else in nature.

Tea tree oil is efficacious in various dilution in **treating acne, arthritis, athlete's foot, bladder infections lice, herpes lesions, warts**. Tea tree oil may be diluted with olive oil and rubbed onto an irritated or inflamed area as in the case of arthritis or gout. Added to bath water, it soothes the entire skin area.

Soothes skin

Tea tree oil can relieve symptoms of minor burns, chapped lips, rash from chicken pox, dandruff, dry skin,eczema. The natural oil also **acts as an antiseptic** to treat minor cuts and even hives and shingles.

Alleviates colds

A few drops placed on a hot wash cloth and held over the nose to breathe through alleviates symptoms of head colds, earaches, asthma, and bronchitis.

Value of natural treatment

The popularity of natural treatments for health problems is once again gaining momentum. In past history, before “modern” medicine, natural medicine was the only treatment available. Over the centuries native peoples found many plants which effectively treated various illnesses. Today, with the problems that have risen from overuse of antibiotics and other medications, and the side effects caused by the use of many of these, the old is becoming new again. Due to the wide spectrum of viral, microbial, and fungal pathogens against which tea tree oil is effective, its use is becoming more widely established.

