

Tea Tree (*Melaleuca alternifolia*)

Common Name: Cajeput oil.

Location: The tea tree is native to Australia, and flourishes in the wet, swampy ground of northern New South Wales and Queensland.

Description: The tea tree, which reaches a height of twenty to twenty-five feet, produces layers of paper-like bark and bears pointed leaves and spikes of white flowers. For centuries before Europeans arrived, native Australians used the leaves of this tree as an antiseptic. Named the “tea tree” by Captain Cook, this tree rapidly became a valued remedy used by the European settlers to treat cuts, burns, and insect bites. Tea tree soon became widely recognized as a powerful disinfectant.

Properties: The leaves and small branches are picked year round for distillation into essential oil.

Uses: Tea tree oil is an antiseptic that is active against many bacteria and fungi, including some that are resistant to antibiotics. However, it is not as effective as oral antibiotics for some conditions. Used as a gargle, it eases sore throats associated with colds. It should not be swallowed. Australian dentists frequently use tea tree oil

mouthwash prior to dental procedures and as a daily preventative measure against periodontal disease.

Tea tree oil has deodorant properties, most likely because it suppresses odor-causing bacteria. It controls foot odor and sweetens bad breath. Benefits of tea tree oil for specific health conditions include treatment of the following: acne, athlete’s foot, ringworm, boils, insect bites, mastitis, dandruff, infected nails, vaginosis and yeast infections.

Doses: Tea tree is used externally in a variety of forms, but it is not taken internally, as it may cause nerve damage and other problems if ingested. The best tea tree products contain oil from the species *Melaleuca alternifolia* only, standardized to contain not more than 10 percent cineol (an irritant) and at least 30 percent terpinen-4-ol.

Warnings: People who are allergic to celery or thyme should not use tea tree oil, since tea tree shares a potential allergen, d-limonene, with these plants. Tea tree oil can be applied to minor cuts, but you should use caution in applying it to more extensive areas of broken skin or rashes not due to fungus.