

Backhousia citriodora Lemon Scented Myrtle



Backhousia citriodora flowering, March 2015, GBG (Photo: DJ, CC BY-NC 4.0)

The genus *Backhousia* is in the flowering plant family Myrtaceae. The genus is endemic to rainforests and seasonally dry forests of Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia, Australia. *Backhousia citriodora* has a natural distribution from Mackay to Brisbane. Other common names are Sweet Verbena Myrtle, Lemon Scented Verbena, and Lemon Scented Backhousia. Lemon Myrtle was given the botanical name *Backhousia citriodora* in 1853 after the English botanist James Backhouse. The common name reflects the strong lemon smell of the crushed leaves. *Lemon Myrtle* is sometimes confused with Lemon Ironbark *Eucalyptus staigeriana*.

Plant Description

It grows to between 5 and 8 m high. The dense, glossy leaves are similar to the Lilly Pilly *Syzygium smithii*, also in the family Myrtaceae. *Backhousia citriodora* produces clusters of fine, feathery, cream flowers from summer through to autumn. It needs good drainage and frost protection while young.



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Backhousia citriodora: Left to right: 1. Leaves. 2. Dried and crushed Lemon Myrtle leaves used in foods. ‘CSIRO is working with Aboriginal communities and Australian industry to help develop the bush foods industry. CSIRO is seeking ways to lower production costs and increase product quality in order to meet the growing demand for a variety of food ingredients from Australian native plants, seeds and fruits’ CSIRO. (Both photos: CSIRO, Wikimedia commons, CC BY 3.0). 3. Lemon Myrtle leaves yield 1-3% oil, of which 90-98% is Citral, the combination of chemicals that gives the oil it lemon flavour and aroma. (Photo: Itineranttrader, Wikipedia, Public domain).

Uses

Indigenous Australians have long used Lemon Myrtle, both in cuisine and as a healing plant. The oil has the highest Citral ($C_{10}H_{16}O$) purity; typically higher than Lemongrass. It is also considered to have a “cleaner and sweeter” aroma than comparable sources of Citral-lemongrass and *Litsea cubeba* (a member of the family Lauraceae from Asia).

Lemon Myrtle is one of the well-known bushfood flavours and is sometimes referred to as the “Queen of the lemon herbs”. The leaf is often used as dried flakes, or in the form of an encapsulated flavour essence for enhanced shelf life. It has a range of uses such as lemon myrtle flakes in shortbread; flavouring in pasta; whole leaf with baked fish; infused in macadamia or vegetable oils; and made into tea and tea blends. It can also be used in milk based foods such as cheesecake, lemon flavoured ice-cream and sorbet without curdling problem associated with lemon fruit acidity.

The dried leaf has free radical scavenging ability.

Antimicrobial

Lemon Myrtle essential oil possesses anti-microbial properties; however, the undiluted essential oil is toxic to human cells in vitro. When diluted to approximately 1%, absorption through the skin and subsequent damage is thought to be minimal. The oil is a popular ingredient in health care and cleaning products, especially soaps, lotions, skin-whitening preparations and shampoos.

Cultivation

Lemon myrtle is a cultivated ornamental plant. It is a hardy plant which tolerates all but the poorest of drained soils. It can be slow growing but responds well to slow release fertilisers. It can be propagated from cutting but is slow to strike.



Backhousia citriodora
GBG November 2018
Photo: RH.

References

Wikipedia: *Backhousia citriodora*
The Creative Gardeners Companion,
Rosemary Davies, 1987.

Summary

Family: Myrtaceae
Species: *Backhousia citriodora*
Common name: Lemon Scented Myrtle

