Essential oils—the fragrant portions of plants and herbs—have been used in traditional cultures throughout the world for millennia. Today, the traditional use of essential oils continues, as science has furthered our understanding of how oils can fight disease and enhance overall health and wellness. As a result, numerous “classic” essential oils—such as lemon, eucalyptus, clove, and so forth—are now recognized and widely used by herbalists everywhere.

Amazingly, however, new essential oils are being discovered in exotic locales, and their health-promoting properties are as promising—or even more so—than some of the widely known classic oils. An excellent example of this is a group of several oils that are found in the Amazon territories of Ecuador and Brazil, a region that possesses the perfect conditions for its exquisite array of species to develop and flourish.

Copaiba

Copaiba resin and essential oil was first recorded in European medicine in 1625 (it was brought back from the New World by the Jesuits and called Jesuit’s balsam), and has been used in South America for the treatment of a variety of ailments. In the United States, it was an official drug in the U.S. Pharmacopoeia from 1820 to 1910. Ethnobotanist Mark Plotkin reports that copaiba oil has disinfectant, diuretic, laxative, and stimulant properties. The Encyclopedia of Common Natural Ingredients cites copaiba as possessing diuretic, antibacterial, anti-inflammatory, expectorant, disinfectant, and stimulant capabilities.

Healers and curanderos in the Amazon of Brazil rely on copaiba to treat chronic pain, and it is used as a topical anti-inflammatory agent for all types of skin irritations and infections. They also employ the oil as a strong antiseptic and expectorant for the respiratory tract (including bronchitis and sinusitis) and as an anti-inflammatory and antiseptic for the urinary tract (for cystitis, bladder, and kidney infections). In Peruvian traditional medicine, three or four drops of the resin are mixed with a spoonful of honey and taken as a natural sore throat remedy (including bronchitis and sinusitis) and as an anti-inflammatory and antiseptic for the urinary tract (for cystitis, bladder, and kidney infections). In Peruvian traditional medicine, three or four drops of the resin are mixed with a spoonful of honey and taken as a natural sore throat remedy.

Oils of the Amazon

How Newly Discovered Essential Oils from the Jungles of the Amazon Can Improve Health, Boost Energy and Enhance Emotional Wellness

References


has a rich, uplifting, woody smell. It’s important to note that only copaiba essential oil found near the Amazon rain forest basin contains the optimal natural compounds needed for therapeutic-grade copaiba oil. Gas chromatograph and mass spectrometer testing demonstrate that copaiba contains high levels of beta caryophyllene, gamma elemene, and alpha humulene.

Of all essential oils studied, copaiba contains the highest levels of sesquiterpenes known as beta caryophyllene, which exerts powerful anti-inflammatory action as well as anti-ulcer and gastroprotective properties. And according to researchers at the University of Quebec, caryophyllene also has other biological properties, such as “antibiotic, antioxidant, anticarcinogenic and local anesthetic activities.”

In a 2004 review of over two dozen essential oils published in the International Journal of Aromatherapy, copaiba was ranked second-highest in ability to block a compound involved in systemic inflammation: 5-lipoxygenase. It ranked much higher than helichrysum and German chamomile, two other potent anti-inflammatory essential oils.

Other research from a separate team of Italian scientists identified that alpha humulene blocked two different anti-inflammatory cytokines, while beta caryophyllene inhibited only one.

Fortunately, science has helped illuminate how copaiba oil may exert its healing benefits. For instance, a recent study from Italian researchers found that copaiba may prevent the clotting of red blood cells and protect the blood vessels.

Ocotea Quixos

Often called “American cinnamon,” the ocotea tree produces bark and leaves that have virtually the same odor as cinnamon grown in Asia, but with a chemistry that is very different. It contains the highest known levels of alpha humulene, a powerful anti-inflammatory that may have even wider-ranging effects than beta caryophyllene. A study at Saint Catherine Federal University found that alpha humulene blocked two different anti-inflammatory cytokines, while beta caryophyllene inhibited only one.

Like copaiba, the ocotea tree has long been a source of health and wellness for indigenous cultures of the Amazon. Anecdotal data suggests that in an effort to benefit from ocotea’s healthful properties, natives of this area would steep the leaves and fruit calyx (husk) in water for a time before drinking the water. Amazonian peoples have long revered ocotea for its purification abilities. For this reason, it is still employed today in different purification rituals.

Ocotea contains more than 40 compounds in ocotea oil. The findings indicate that ocotea possesses significant antioxidant, antibacterial and antifungal properties.

Other Oils of the Amazon

Eucalyptus Blue: A member of the eucalyptus family, eucalyptus blue is another oil from Ecuador and the surrounding Amazon region that has recently emerged. Like traditional eucalyptus, the “blue” version (which has a slightly bluish hue) is highly prized for its aromatic uses. Its potential benefits include being able to relieve respiratory infections, reduce inflammation, and thwart bacteria and other pathogens.

Ruta: Also known as “rue,” the Ecuadorian variety of ruta is a powerful anti-stress agent. Used for centuries and referenced even in the Bible, ruta can be an effective antidote to relieve stress, induce restful sleep, relieve anxiety, and exert a subtle mental and emotional energy. The mood-boosting benefits of ruta are enhanced by using it with other essential oils such as lavender and valerian.

Palo Santo: Palo santo comes from the same botanical family as frankincense, although it is found in South America rather than the Middle East. Like frankincense, palo santo is known as a spiritual oil, traditionally used by the Incas to purify and cleanse the spirit from negative energies. Even its Spanish name reflects how highly this oil is regarded—palo santo means “holy wood” or “sacred wood.”

Dorado Azul: Rich in eucalyptol and beta pinene, dorado azul has powerful purifying properties, improves digestion and enhances mood.