

*Catha edulis*

[Synonyms : *Catha forsskalii*, *Celastrus edulis*, *Methyscophyllum glaucum*]

**ARABIAN TEA** is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to tropical east Africa (particularly Arabia and Ethiopia) it has tiny white flowers.

It is also known as *Abessinischer Tee* (German), Abyssinian tea, Bushman's tea, Cafta, *Kat* (Arabic), Kat bush, *Kathstrauch* (German), *Khat* (Arabic, Finnish), *Miraa* (German), *Muirungi* (Kikuyu), and *Qat* (Arabic).

Warning – it is extremely poisonous if taken to excess internally. Large doses can cause paralysis. It can also cause hallucination and in rare cases aggressive behaviour. In some countries Arabian tea is classified as a drug that can lead to addiction.

*Edulis* is Latin (edible).

One of the traditional stories recalling the discovery of Arabian tea is reminiscent of some which are told about coffee (*Coffea*). A Yemeni goatherd noticed his flock were particularly alert and excited when they had been browsing on Arabian tea's twigs and leaves. So one night, before settling for sleep, he decided to try some himself. To his amazement he not only found that his tiredness fell away but that he was able to meditate without pause through the hours of darkness.

Some authorities claim that the discovery and use of Arabian tea in Arabian countries pre-dates that of coffee (*Coffea*) by many centuries but as yet this is unconfirmed.

It is held that initially the leaves were the preserve of the elderly who chewed them to maintain stamina during night prayers. Arabian tea leaves then progressed in their general acceptance in the community as participants in religious ceremonies, including weddings and funerals, and in due time pilgrims on the route to Mecca either took them as a tea or chewed them for their stimulating qualities.

Green leaves and twigs are chewed, the dried leaves are infused for a tea, and when powdered the leaves are popular with the elderly who may have weak teeth. Arabian tea continues its role as a significant part of Middle Eastern life today – so much so that fresh supplies are air-freighted daily, especially to Moslem countries, from those areas where it is cultivated. [Its importance as an export commodity is emphasised when one appreciates that this air traffic led to the establishment of Ethiopian Airlines.] In the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century cultivation of Arabian tea in Ethiopia received a dramatic boost when many Ethiopian farmers replaced their coffee crops (*Coffea arabica*) with it. Families which had been growing coffee for generations had become destitute after a massive loss of income caused by a severe slump in world coffee prices which only exacerbated that received from poor harvests in several years of drought.

In Ethiopia the leaves are also used to flavour a honey wine.

Medicinally, an infusion of leaves has provided a treatment for asthma, coughs and other respiratory ailments.