

Cinnamomum camphora

[Synonyms : *Camphora camphora*, *Camphora officinarum*, *Cinnamomum camphora* var. *glaucescens*, *Cinnamomum camphora* var. *nominale*, *Cinnamomum camphorides*, *Cinnamomum nominale*, *Cinnamomum simondii*, *Laurus camphora*, *Persea camphora*]

CAMPHOR TREE is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to China, Japan and Taiwan, it has tiny, greenish- or yellow-white flowers.

It is also known as *Albero della canfora* (Italian), *Alcanfor* (Spanish), *Alcanforero* (Spanish), *Arbol del alcanfor* (Spanish), *Arvore de camphora* (Portuguese), *Campher* (German), *Campherbaum* (German), *Campherlorbeer* (German), Camphire, Camphor, Camphor laurel, *Camphre* (French), *Camphrier* (French), *Candra* (Sanskrit), *Canfora* (Italian), *Canforeira* (Portuguese), *Canforo* (Italian), Cemphire, *Cutakkarpuram* (Malayalam), Gum camphor, Japanese camphor, *Kafoor* (Urdu), *Kafrovnik lékařský* (Czech), *Kafur* (Urdu), *Kamfer* (Swedish), *Kamferipuu* (Finnish), *Kamfertræ* (Danish), *Kamforarbo* (Esperanto), *Kamfornii lavr* (Russian), *Kamfornoe derevo* (Russian), *Kampfer* (German), *Kampferbaum* (German), *Kapoor* (Hindi), *Kapur* (Hindi), *Kapuru-gaha* (Singhalese), *Kapuur* (Nepalese), *Karabun* (Thai), *Karpoora* (Hindi), *Karppuram* (Tamil), *Karpur* (Hindi), *Karpura* (Kannada, Sanskrit), *Karpurah* (Sanskrit), *Karpuram* (Hindi, Malayalam, Tamil), *Karpuramu* (Telugu), *Korichnik kamfornii* (Russian), *Kusu no ki* (Japanese), Laurel camphor, *Lauro canfora* (Italian), *Mushkapur* (Hindi), *Nioi no ki* (Japanese), *Nok na mu* (Korean), *Pacca karpuram* (Telugu), *Pacchkarapuram* (Hindi), *Patckafur* (Urdu), *Payok* (Burmese), *Payuk* (Burmese), *Skořicovník kafrovnik* (Czech), *Subhrams* (Malayalam), *Xiang zhang shu* (Chinese), *Zhang* (Chinese), and *Zhang shu* (Chinese); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of fragrance.

The camphor tree grows slowly and many growers believe that the camphor cannot be extracted until a tree is 24-40 (sometimes even 50) years old. The trees are felled and an oil is extracted from the wood. The wood is also distilled to release white camphor crystals. Commercial camphor is extracted from the root and leaves as well. But it should be noted that the camphor obtained from camphor tree is not considered as valuable a trading commodity as that from Borneo camphor (*Dryobalanops aromatica*).

Warning – large doses both internally and externally (camphor can be absorbed through the skin) are poisonous. It can cause vomiting, convulsions, palpitations and death. If suffering from some heart disorders it should only be taken under the supervision of a qualified practitioner.

Camphora means ‘of camphor’ with reference to the scent.

Authorities believe that camphor, as a medicine, reached the eastern Mediterranean in about the 1st Century AD and in this capacity was introduced to Europeans by the Arabs. (Some authorities have suggested that this early camphor was Borneo camphor from *Dryobalanops aromatica* not the camphor recognized today from *Cinnamomum camphora*.) For many centuries those Europeans who came across camphor thought of it as a rare and valuable perfume which they associated especially with the rich in southern India who used it for perfuming drinking water. Despite this uncertain history there is no doubt that camphor (as a drug distilled from the wood) was known in Europe in the 12th Century as there is evidence that the German abbess, Hildegard (1098-1179), used it.

Some authorities note that one of the first European recorded references was made by Marco Polo (1254-1324) during the 13th Century.

Both the Chinese and Japanese are believed to have been manufacturing commercial camphor some time before the 9th Century. In the 16th Century there was reference to it in the Chinese herbal, *Pun-tsao-kang-muh*. It may be however that some of these records are related to the Sumatran tree that Garcia de Orta (1500-1569) a Portuguese physician contended, in his epic work on tropical medicine *Coloquios dos simples e drogas e consas medicinais da India* published in 1563, was so superior and costly that it could not reach Europe.

Nevertheless the camphor tree was introduced to the Netherlands in 1676. There it was cultivated and from there spread elsewhere in Europe.

The oil (known as 'oil of camphor' or Japan Camphor, which has a strong, penetrating, fragrant smell and a bitter, pungent taste) is used commercially in manufacturing soaps and deodorants, and oil and crystals are used in the production of medicinal preparations. Oil is also used in the manufacture of disinfectants and celluloids, as well as chemical preparations. The wood is used in China and Japan for building interiors and for making furniture.

Camphor is still employed today in pharmaceutical preparations, but as a moth repellent it has been superseded by a synthetic 'camphor'. The coal tar equivalent for plant-derived camphor is also gaining ground at present for medicinal use but the plant camphor is still employed in some disinfectants.

Medicinally, Oil of camphor is rarely taken internally and then, often with other substances. (In the past the oil was used to impregnate scarlet ribbons that were worn to repel fever.)