

*Copaifera officinalis*

[Synonyms : *Copaiba officinalis*, *Copaifera jacquini*, *Copaiva officinalis*]

**COPAIBA** is an evergreen tree. It is native to tropical South America and to the West Indies. It is also known as Balsam of copaiba, Copaiba balsam, Copaiva, *Copaive* (Italian), *Copayer* (French), *Kopaiva* (German), and Ironwood.

The liquid balsam is harvested from re-sealable and re-usable holes drilled in the trunk at about three feet from ground level and it hardens when the essential oils evaporate. Each tree can produce 17-18 kg. of oil per year. Essence is extracted from the resin.

Warning – large doses are poisonous. They can cause nausea, fever, vomiting, bloody urine and a measles-like eruption on the skin.

*Officinalis* means ‘of the shop (usually the apothecary’s or herbalist’s)’. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name.

This is just one of several species which provide copaiba resin, and the finest quality is considered by some to come from the species most common in the lower Amazon region. Apart from ‘copaiba’ the resin is also called Maracaibo copaiba.

In 1979 it was discovered that the resin or liquid balsam, which oozes from the tree trunk when it is slashed, could be used without any processing as a diesel fuel – and each tree can produce 4 gallons in 2 hours. This is being investigated further in experimental plantations in Japan.

This resin is also used in varnishes that are applied to oil paintings and its properties lend the works of art a transparency and lustre.

Both the resin and essence are used on a commercial scale by the perfumery industry and toiletry industries, the latter in soap. It is also used by the paint industry in lacquers and varnishes, by the paper industry in carbon paper and by the pharmaceutical industry in cough medicines.

Medicinally, in the past both the resin and extracted essences have been used as ingredients in ointments, particularly for healing chilblains. This resin is also used to treat, among other ailments, catarrh, bronchitis, cystitis, diarrhoea and piles.