

Dryobalanops aromatica

[Synonyms : *Dryobalanops camphora*]

BORNEO CAMPHOR is an evergreen tree. Native to Malaysia and Sumatra (now an Indonesian island) it has small white flowers every three or four years.

It is also known as Barus, Barus camphor, *Borneo-kamfer* (Swedish), *Borneon kamferi* (Finnish), Brunei teak, Common Borneo camphor tree, *Kapur* (Malay), and Sumatra camphor.

East Indian oil of Camphor is collected from trunk cavities of young trees before it has crystallized and can vary from a thick, black oil to a thin, watery liquid. This camphor is considered to be more valuable commercially than that obtained from the camphor tree (*Cinnamomum camphora*).

Warning – large doses are poisonous. If suffering from heart disorders it should only be taken internally under the supervision of a qualified practitioner.

Aromatica is derived from Greek *aroma* (spice) meaning ‘aromatic, fragrant or scented’.

The Chinese have used the oil as a diluent for inks when they make artists’ colours. The Japanese have employed it for fuel, and for making varnishes.

Camphor obtained from older trees is particularly prized by the Chinese who have used it for centuries for embalming, and for scenting soap, as well as in medicines. It offered lucrative merchandise for the Arab traders in the 6th Century and as a camphor it is said by some authorities to have reached Europe before the camphor obtained from *Cinnamomum camphora* which is recognized today.

Mention of the Arab traders brings to mind the rumours they spread about their sources (and the harvesting techniques) of some of their lucrative merchandise in order not only to keep the price high but also to deter others from attempting to obtain the goods direct. Apparently camphor collectors in Sumatra (now part of Indonesia) were equally adept at this game – maintained even into the 20th Century. So much so that a large part of the earlier written description of the camphor collectors’ methods is understood to be highly suspect as it can mix superstitious practices (enacted in order to stumble on a tree yielding a valuable crop of resin or to prevent a serious accident while hunting in the forest) with actual harvesting procedure. In fairness it must have been difficult for some of the early observers as apparently the collectors would actually distort their speech in the belief that this would disguise their intentions from the guardian spirits – and one particular practice which was supposed to ensure that the collector discovered a tree with large pieces of camphor required him to eat coarse salt before embarking on his journey.

Marco Polo (1254-1324), the famous Venetian traveller, came across it during his tours in the 13th Century, as also did the celebrated Portuguese poet, Luis de Camoens (1524-1580), who is often compared with the English Chaucer (c. 1345-1400), or the Italian Dante (1265-1321). In 1571 Luis de Camoens referred to it as the ‘balsam of disease’. Both the oil and camphor used to be exported (from the 6th Century) to the Arabs from Malaysia.

Locally the fruit were boiled and eaten as a vegetable.

Also strips of the bark have been used locally not only to make walls of homes but for flooring, and beds as well, and they have provided material for basketry too.

Borneo camphor is still used throughout the East Indies for incense and for embalming the

dead. It is also used on a commercial basis for scenting soap.

The wood is used locally for building houses and bridges as well as for manufacturing boarding. It is also sought after for building insect repellent natural history cabinets (especially for entomologists).

Medicinally, both the oil and camphor resin are said to have similar properties, and have been used for treating colic, cholera, stomach and bowel disorders, neuralgia, rheumatism, sprains and bruises.