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### *Guaiacum officinale*

**GUAIACUM** is an evergreen tree. Native to the Caribbean, Middle America, Mexico and the north coast of South America, it has small, delicately fragrant, blue (fading to pale silver) flowers.

It is also known as *Bakaut* (Russian), Common lignumvitae, *Fransosenholts* (Swedish), *Franzosenholz* (German), *Frazostræ* (Danish), *Gaiac* (French), *Gayak* (Creole), *Guaiac* (Middle American Indian), Guaiacum resin, Guaiacum wood, *Guajaco* (Italian), *Guajakholzbaum* (German), *Guajakkipuu* (Swedish), *Guayacán* (Spanish), Gum guaiacum, *Gvajako oficina* (Esperanto), Lignum vitae, *Pockenholz* (German), *Pockholz* (German), Pockwood, *Pokhout* (Dutch), *Schlangenhholz* (German), Tree of life, and *Wayacá* (Dutch).

The heartwood is harvested commercially and some logs are used to extract the resin.

Warning – internal overdoses are said to cause kidney inflammation.

From at least January 2002 guaiacum has been included under Appendix II of CITES. This means that authorities believe this species will be seriously threatened if it is over-harvested and therefore trade in it should be monitored and controlled. Governments are required to issue export licences to certify that this species was legally acquired and that its exportation does not threaten the survival of that species in the wild there.

*Officinale* 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.

Guaiacum is a national tree of the Bahamas, and its flower is a national flower of Jamaica.

The tree, which is said to have the hardest commercial timber known today, is nearly extinct. It lasted for about 100 years when it was used to make the lock hinges on the Erie Canal in Canada. While in the West Indies it was used to make the sugar windmills. The durable wood was turned into a variety of objects where its weight was not counterproductive, such as furniture, pulleys, propeller shafts, pestles and rulers. In the sports realm it provided skittle boards and, exclusively, flat green and crown green bowls. A set of two or four of these bowls had to be cut from the same log of seasoned heartwood and, because of a shortage of this wood today, they are now more usually made of synthetic material.

Local inhabitants of the island of St. Domingo in the Caribbean extracted a drug *Guayacan* from the wood. However Europeans came to believe that the wood itself could cure syphilis and it was exported across the Atlantic for this purpose under Spanish monopoly for the first time in 1514 (some authorities say 1508). The drug built up such a reputation during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century for curing this and other diseases (particularly skin disorders) that it was then known as *lignum vitae* (‘wood of life’). Treatment involved administering considerable doses of the decoction and wrapping the patient up tightly in bed in a very hot room. It was shown in 1932 that raising the body temperature to 42<sup>o</sup>C alone contributed significantly to the effectiveness of the cure. The wood or resin’s use then declined and it tended to be found only as an ingredient in ‘blood-purifying mixtures’ known in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries as Compound Alterative Mixtures. These were often

combined with sarsaparilla (*Smilax aristolochiaefolia*) and were of no benefit whatsoever in the treatment of syphilis.

Guaiacum resin has also been used in distinguishing bloodstains from other materials.

Today a tincture is used commercially for a colour test to detect oxidising agents (which will turn it blue), and the resin provides an antioxidant for edible fats and oils. The wood is used for carving and for making tableware.

The resin, which is preferred today, was also and continues to be used as a preventative for gout and was used to treat rheumatoid arthritis too. In Jamaica the resin, soaked in rum, provided a gargle for sore throats and was also used to treat bruises and cuts. The Caribbeans have used the leaf juice for biliousness and in Barbados leaves are still applied to rheumatic joints.