

Melaleuca quinquenervia

[Synonyms : *Melaleuca cajuputi*, *Melaleuca latifolia*, *Melaleuca leucadendra*, *Melaleuca leucadendron*, *Melaleuca minor*, *Melaleuca viridiflora* var. *rubriflora*, *Metrosideros quinquenervia*, *Myrtus leucadendra*]

CAJUPUT TREE is an evergreen tree. Native to eastern Australasia and to Malaysia it has bottlebrush-like spikes (ending in a tuft of leaves) of tiny fragrant, creamy white or greenish-yellow (occasionally pink or purple) flowers with many creamy-white stamens in united bundles.

It is also known as Australian tea tree, Belbowrie, Bottlebrush tree, Broadleaf paperbark, Broadleaf teatree, Broadleaved paperbark, Broadleaved teatree, Cadjeput, Cajeput, *Cajuputier* (French), *Cajuputte* (Bengali), Five-veined paperbark, *Gelam* (Javanese, Sundanese), *Kayappudai* (Tamil), *Kayaputi* (Hindi), *Kayu putih* (Malay), *Med* (Thai), *Melaleuca*, *Melaleŭko kvinripa* (Esperanto), *Niaouli* (New Caledonian), Paperbark, Paperbarked tree, Paperbark tree, Punk tree, River teatree, *Sa-met* (Thai), Swamp paperbark, Swamp tea tree, Tea tree, *Teebaum* (German), *Teepuu* (Finnish), Ti tree, Weeping paperbark, Weeping tea tree, White tea tree, and White wood.

The flowers and their nectar attract flying foxes as well as birds.

A colourless or pale yellow essential oil (known as Niaouli oil or Gomenol) is steam distilled from the leaves and twigs. This has the smell of camphor (*Cinnamomum camphora*), rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) or cardamom seeds (*Elettaria cardamomum*) and a camphor-like, aromatic bitter taste.

Warning – the flowering tree especially can cause headache, facial rashes, nausea and respiratory irritation. Bark can cause dermatitis. Overdoses of oil can cause gastrointestinal and kidney inflammation.

Quinquenervia is derived from Latin *quinque* (five) and *nervi-* (nerve, tendon, sinew, ligament, fibre) components meaning ‘five-nerved’.

Its contradictory appeal is illustrated well by the fact that the cajuput tree is being introduced to swampy farming areas in the New Territories by the Hong Kong Government in efforts to stabilize the habitat there – and has long been cultivated as a shade tree in Malaysia especially on narrow roads. On the other hand its past introduction to southern North America has led to current disfavour in Florida where it has become invasive and is threatening to take over the Everglades.

The bark was once used to make native shields and also came to be employed for roofing, caulking and packing. It was used as a substitute for paper and some of the ancient sacred writings made on it have survived to this day. Bark has been used like cork (*Quercus suber*) for insulation, and it has been used as filling in life belts and fishing floats, and pillows and mattresses.

Malaysian medicinal uses for the tree were first noted by Europeans in the 17th Century. Today it is commercially the most important plant in the Bottle Brush group as a source of niaouli oil or gomenol (similar to cajuput oil obtained from a close relative). This oil is used as an insect repellent, particularly for mosquitoes, fleas, and lice – and is also an ingredient in some proprietary medicines.

The hard and heavy, strong and durable, mottled or veined, pinkish-brown wood has been used for shipbuilding and piling, as well as for making floats for fishing nets, pit props and fence posts. It has been used locally to make torches as well and it also provides good fuel.

Medicinally, the oil was once used in the treatment of tuberculosis, and has also been used in remedies for headaches, earache and toothache. Today it can be found as an ingredient in various pharmaceutical products, particularly for rheumatism and the treatment of sunburn, as well as cough, cold and toothache preparations.