

Rhododendron groenlandicum

[Synonyms : *Ledum groenlandicum*, *Ledum latifolium*, *Ledum palustre* subsp. *groenlandicum*, *Ledum palustre* var. *latifolium*]

LABRADOR TEA is an evergreen shrub. Native to northern North America and to Greenland it has small aromatic, green-centred, white flowers with conspicuous stamens.

It is also known as Bog labrador tea, Common labrador-tea, Country tea, Crystal tea, Gowiddie, Hudson's Bay tea, Indian tea, James tea, *Laden ag* (Turkish), *Ledo a foglie strette* (Italian), *Ledone* (Italian), *Lédon palustre* (French), Marsh rosemary, *Ramerino di padule* (Italian), *Rojovník grónský* (Czech), *Romarin sauvage* (French), St. James's tea, *Sumpfporst* (German), Swamp tea, *Wilder rosmarin* (German), and Woolly Labrador tea.

Groenlandicum means 'of or from Greenland'.

From records it is apparent that a very large number of North American Indian tribes used the shrub to make tea (primarily with the leaves). They included the Bella Coola, Kitasoo, some of the Algonkin, the Shuswap, Thompson, Nitinaht, Micmac, Hanakisala, Oweekeno, Saanich, Salish, Chippewa, Anticosti, Cree, Okanagan-Colville, Hesquiat, Haisla, Potawatomi, Malecite and Makah Indians, as well as the Arctic Inuits. It is hardly surprising then that at the time of the American War of Independence (1774-1781) the dried leaves were infused for a tea by the settlers as well as a substitute for the real thing, tea leaves (*Camellia sinensis*).

Both the Iroquois and Potawatomi Indians are said to have used the shrub to obtain a brown dye that the former used on wool in particular.

The shrub was a source of medicine for many North American Indian tribes, including the Nootka, Potawatomi and Anticosti Indians. It was used to cure colds by the Kitasoo, Micmac, Hanaksiala, Abnaki, Haisla and Oweekeno Indians, and some of the Algonkin tribe took it for headaches. Records indicate that the Malecite, Micmac, Makah and Okanagan-Colville tribes all used it to treat some kidney disorders, while the Bella Coola took it for various stomach upsets, and Cree, Micmac and Gitksan Indians all used it as a remedy for fluid retention. It was given to children suffering from jaundice in the Montagnais tribe. For different parts of the Cree tribe labrador tea offered a remedy for pneumonia and whooping-cough, it was a means of causing vomiting, and it was also applied to wounds and insect bites. Makah Indians used it during childbirth, the Montagnais turned to it for easing fever, and they both relied upon it as a remedy for some blood disorders. Hanaksiala and Haisla Indians prescribed the shrub for treating tuberculosis, and it was a Micmac cure for asthma and scurvy. The Oweekeno Indians recommended it for easing sore throats, and the Shuswap tribe relied upon it for some eye problems, including blindness. The latter also used it to treat the symptoms of contact with poison ivy (*Rhus radicans*), the Cree and Chippewa tribes applied it to burns, and the Chippewa also used it for healing skin ulcers. Both the Quinault Indians and some of the Cree tribe applied it for easing rheumatic symptoms. While the Nitinaht, Haisla and Hanaksiala tribes all took it to enhance appetite. Micmac and Salish Indians and some of the Algonkin tribe looked upon it as a tonic.

The leaves have been employed in Russia for tanning leather. They are also believed by some to have moth repellent qualities and can be strewn amongst clothing, and in Lapland mice

are said to have been deterred from silos by placing the shrub's branches in amongst the grain.

Medicinally, herbalists have recommended Labrador tea for easing some rheumatic pain.