

# Essential Oil of Patchouli

*Pogostemon cablin* (Syn. *Pogostemon patchouli*)

## History

Patchouli, from the Hindustan *pacholi*, was used extensively in India to scent fabrics. (During Victorian times, the English had a passion for cashmere shawls imported from India that were permeated with the scent of patchouli.) Patchouli has been predominant in traditional Chinese, Malaysian, and Japanese medicine for its antiseptic, insecticide, and stomachic properties. Indian inks were distinguished by the scent of patchouli. The patchouli scented the ink, fixed the color, and the alcohol patchoulol aided the ink to dry more quickly.

## Parts Used

The essential oil is steam distilled from dried, young leaves without stems. The best oil is freshly distilled near plantations where it is grown. Adulteration is often made with cubeb, *Piper cubeba*, and cedar oils.

## Cultivation

Patchouli is native to Asia. The shrub grows wild in Sumatra and Java between the altitudes of 3,000 and 6,000 ft. A perennial, fragrant herb with a height of 2-3 ft., its axillary and terminal stems are sturdy and have furry leaves and small white flowers tinged with mauve. It thrives in a damp, warm climate and needs fertile, well-drained soil. The patchouli bushes tend to weaken the soil, so they should occasionally be rotated with other crops. Seed is rarely produced and propagation is by stem cuttings. Cuttings need to be protected from the sun until established. Replanting must be done every three to four years.



Figure 63: Patchouli *Pogostemon cablin* is a perennial, fragrant herb that grows to about 2-3-ft. high. The leaves are small and furry, and the flowers are white.

Image by Dorene Petersen. © 2001

## Family

Lamiaceae (formerly Labiatae)

## Identification

Patchouli grows to about 2-3-ft. high, has “egg-shaped” leaves, and square stems. Patchouli is well-known for its characteristic odor, which is widely used in products in Asian and India, and is thought to improve with age. Older oil, therefore, is preferred by perfumers<sup>1</sup>.

## Common Name(s)

Patchouly, Penang patchouli

## Sources

Patchouli oil is produced in Indonesia, India, the East and West Indies, Malaysia, Brazil, Japan, and China; however, China is a producer of a cheaper quality.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/p/patcho15.html>



Figure 64: Patchouli *Pogostemon cablin* photographed in India. Image by Dorene Petersen. © 1999

## Harvesting and Production

The oil is found in all parts of the patchouli plant, including the root, but experiments have shown that the top leaves contain the highest-quality oil.

The leaves are cut during the morning and dried in the shade for at least three days before distilling. To get a full yield of oil, the plant is best dried. Drying the leaf is said to make the cell more permeable. It is not clear whether the fresh leaf would give a better yield if the leaf were crushed before distillation.

The yield of oil increases if it is distilled at a higher temperature over a 24-hour period.

Some oil is distilled in Europe and the United States from imported dried leaves. Many popular books about aromatherapy state that the leaves are first dried and then allowed to ferment, but this is a misunderstanding. Fermentation does not increase the oil yield; rather, distillers say it causes an unpleasant odor in the oil.

An absolute is also produced using benzene or ether to extract the material from the leaves.

## Characteristics

The oil is dark yellow to orange, often with a green tint, to a dark-brown color, and viscous in consistency. It has a sweet, earthy, rich, and musky aroma that improves with age. Often patchouli is distilled in metal containers. As the iron oxidizes and leaches into the oil, the color gets darker. Research has yet to show if this affects patchouli's therapeutic properties. The perfume industry considers this coloring undesirable and redistills the oil to remove the iron. Patchouli stains the perfume blotter a deep yellow, and it has a silky feel when rubbed between the fingers. It is frequently adulterated with cedarwood oil. To test for this adulterant, leave patchouli oil to evaporate for a few days on a perfume blotter, and a faint cedarwood note will become apparent.

## Active Constituents

Patchouli contains a number of interesting constituents, including:

- The aldehydes benzaldehyde and cinnamic aldehyde.
- Eugenol.
- A ketone patchoulone.
- Sesquiterpenes.
- The monoterpene pinene.
- The anti-inflammatory constituent azulene<sup>1</sup>, which is also found in chamomile.

## Therapeutic Action

Antibacterial, antidepressant, antiemetic, antifungal, anti-infectious, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, antiphlogistic, antiseptic, astringent, antiviral, bactericidal, carminative, decongestant, deodorant,

<sup>1</sup> Gladstone reported the occurrence of azulene in the highest boiling constituents of patchouly [sic] oil. Guenther. 1974. *The Essential Oils*. Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 574.

disinfectant, febrifuge, laxative, peristaltic, resolvent, stimulant, stomachic, tonic, and vulnerary

## Medicinal Uses

Acne, allergies, appetite (excessive), bed sores, burns, colitis, constipation, dandruff, dermatitis, eczema, edema, fatigue, hemorrhoids, herpes, impetigo, indigestion, infections (vaginal), infections (viral), insects (to repel), lethargy, menopausal sweats, scalp (oily), scars, seborrhea, sinus congestion, skin (cracked), skin (dry), thrush (oral), thrush (vaginal), tinea, varicose veins, wounds, and wrinkles

## Therapeutic Actions and Medicinal Uses

**Antimicrobial:** *Pogostemon cablin* from China, Indonesia, and India were tested against 17 pathogenic fungi and 16 common bacteria. *Candida albicans*, *Candida krusei*, *Candida parapsilosis*, *Aspergillus fumigatus*, and *Aspergillus flavus* were resistant to oils from all three countries. *Cryptococcus neoformans*, seven out of eight foot odor causing bacteria, and all the dermatophytes were all susceptible to the Chinese patchouli. The Chinese patchouli had more effective properties overall than the oil from Indonesia and India (this effect was attributed to the higher patchouli alcohol content possessed by the Chinese oil)<sup>2</sup>.

## Household Uses

The leaves and oil are used for potpourri. It covers up musty smells and is used as a moth repellent among linens and wool. This is most likely why it was used to scent fabrics and cashmere during Victorian times. It is still used as a flavoring in Asia and South America, and is often blended with an-

2 Yang D., Michel D., Mandin D., Andriamboavonjy H., Poitry P., Chaumont J-P. 1996. Antifungal and Antibacterial Properties, in vitro, of Three Patchouli Essential Oils of Different Origins. *Acta Bot Gallica* 143 (1):29-35.

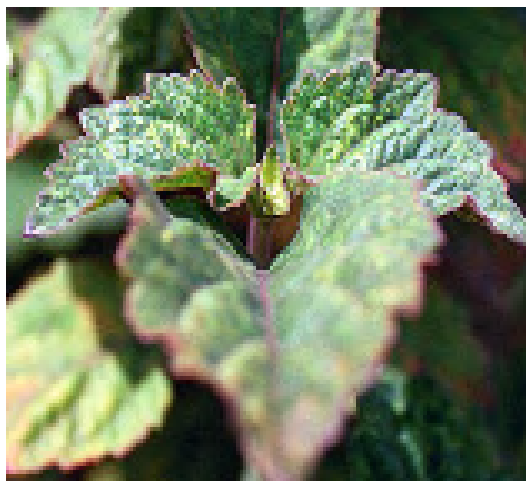


Figure 65: Patchouli *Pogostemon cablin* photographed in India. Image by Dorene Petersen. © 1999

ise and clove as a breath sweetener. No information about the suggested use level is available.

## Perfumery

A favorite fragrance of the hippie generation of the '60s, the aroma of patchouli is powerful and unmistakable. There is a sweet initial note, followed by a rich earth-like body note. Patchouli can last on the perfume blotter for as long as a month. It is used extensively as a fixative in soap, perfume, and cosmetics. Patchouli blends well with bergamot, cedarwood, cinnamon, clary sage, clove, geranium, lavender, myrrh, neroli, oakmoss, rose, sandalwood, and vetiver. No information about the minimum perceptible is available.

## Recommended Daily Dosage

Three times daily unless stated otherwise:

- Adult: 1-2-drops three times daily.
- Externally: 2-4-drops in a bath.

## Cautions and Contraindications

The toxic constituents are patchoulene and cinnamic acid. Avoid the use of patchouli with loss of

appetite or anorexia, because it may reduce appetite<sup>3</sup>. It can cause photosensitivity. The toxic rating is I<sup>4</sup> and a skin patch test is required.

## Formulas

### Mouthwash

Patchouli *Pogostemon cablin*: 5-drops

NZ tea tree *Leptospermum scoparium*: 5-drops

Blend the two oils. Add 2-drops to ½-cup of water and rinse out the mouth.

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3 Grieve, M. 1971. *A Modern Herbal, Volume II*. New York: Dover Publications, 619.

4 Toxic Rating: I = Low, II = Moderate, III = High (Low Therapeutic Margin)