

## Honeybush

**Botanical Name:** *Cyclopia spp.*  
**Family** Fabaceae  
**Common name:** Honeybush

### Background and Uses

Honeybush tea applies to a herbal tea made from several different species of *Cyclopia*, all native to the South Africa. These plants are all woody, fynbos shrubs, and can reach up to a meter in height. The stems are green and golden yellow (color varies between species) and have hairless leaves each of which is divided into three smaller leaflets. The attractive, fragrant yellow flowers of all the species are very similar (Van Wyk & Gericke, 2000). The original honeybush tea was made from *C. genestoides*, a small shrub known as coastal tea (kustee) with distinctive narrow leaflets, restricted to the mountains near the Cape Peninsula of South Africa. This species is now scarce so is no longer used. The main production area has moved to the Langkloof area near Port Elizabeth, where substantial quantities are produced from two other related species *C. intermedia* and *C. subternata* (Van Wyk & Gericke, 2000).



**Fig. 1.** Close-Up of the bright yellow honeybush flowers (left; Photo: P Langenhoven); and a one-year old honeybush (*C. subternata*) plantation (right, Photo: J Goliath).

### Traditional and Modern Medicinal Uses

As a tea, high quality honeybush has a unique sweet honey-like aroma and flavor. Yet, compared to Rooibos, another famous South African herbal tea, very little scientific work is available on honeybush. De Nysschen *et al* (1995) found three major phenolic compounds in honeybush tea leaves: a xanthone c-glycoside, mangiferin and O-glycosides of hesperitin and isosakuranetin, two flavanones. Further research found high levels of (+)-pinitol is present in honeybush tea. Pinitol is used as an expectorant (Beecher,

1989) and also has anti-diabetic activity (Narayanan, 1987). Like Rooibos, it contains minerals in trace amounts and as such complements one's daily mineral intake. Honeybush tea is caffeine-free. The tannin level is also very low at 0.45%. Preliminary research indicates that it has similar health properties to rooibos. It is high in antioxidants, could retard ageing and exhibits antimutagenic activity (Marnewick *et al*, 2000). Traditionally, honeybush was used to treat digestive problems and sleeplessness (Joubert, 1996). Both rooibos and honeybush teas are highly recommended for pregnant women, babies and children. Honeybush is also regarded as beneficial for breast-feeding women as it stimulates milk production.

### **The Ecology of Honeybush**

This indigenous shrub, grows in the coastal districts of the Western and Eastern Cape Provinces, from Darling to Port Elizabeth, being bounded on the north by the Cederberg, Koue Bokkeveld, Klein Swartberg, Groot Swartberg and Kouga mountain ranges. *Cyclopia Vent.* (tribe Podalyrieae) is a genus of ca. 23 species of woody legumes endemic to the fynbos region of South Africa. Most with limited distribution ranges and special habitat preferences. Only *Cyclopia intermedia* ("bergtee") and *Cyclopia subternata* ("vleitee") have found commercial application in the tea industry.

### **Processing Honeybush**

Traditionally honeybush was harvested during the flowering period, because the bright yellow flowers made it easy for the wild harvesters to spot the plant in the mountains. The harvested material usually gets cut or shredded before "fermentation" or curing. Mechanized fodder cutters are used to deliver a uniform product. There are two distinct methods used for honeybush tea fermentation, i.e. fermentation in a curing heap and fermentation at elevated temperatures in a preheated "baking-oven". The use of a preheated oven results in a more standardized quality product since better control over the temperature of the fermentation process is possible and shorter fermentation periods (24-36h) are needed to obtain fully fermented tea, which helps to inhibit mold growth. Fully fermented tea can also be obtained fermenting for 72 hours at 75°C in fermentation drums. Drums are equipped with elements to rotate, and uniformly heat the tea. Processors believe that the final product's appearance is improved by sun-drying. The tea normally takes one to two days to dry, depending on the thickness of the layer as well as weather conditions. Honeybush tea is traditionally a very coarse product, which contributes to the belief that the unrefined product has certain health properties. That is why the tea is often sold as a mixture of short stems and leaves. The final product is put through an electrically driven, cylindrical sieve that has a 6.5 mm aperture screen, to remove all the pieces thicker than a matchstick. Sieved honeybush tea is generally packed in bulk in large, woven plastic bags for local and overseas markets, but smaller portions are also be packed in plastic or tea bags.

### **References**

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