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THE ROAD TO DISCOVERY

It is hard to believe that this column has been running for a year and I hope that in this time it has been shown that innovation and new ideas are always waiting to be found. Sometimes the road to discovery is tortuous and circumspect, and this month's story does not begin to reveal the many people who have given of their time freely and willingly in the pursuit of this material.

COMMON NAME

Tarchonanthus camphoratus is also known as Camphor Bush, Kanferbos, Wild Camphor Bush. Wild Camphor Tree, Sage Wood, Wild Cotton, Wild Sage Wood, African Flea Bane. In Afrikaans it is called Vaalboos, Kanferbos, Vaaibos, or Veldvaalbos. In Ndebele it is Umnqebe and in Southern Sotho it is known as Mofahlana. Other names include Mkalambati (Swahili), Mohata (Tswana), Mathola (Xhosa) and Amathola (Zulu), however the name that I choose to use is that of the Massai, which is Ol-leleshwa (or in Kikuyu it is Ki-leleshwa).

DESCRIPTION

It is a shrub or small tree up to 9m in height; over its great range this species has adapted to a wide variety of habitats, from sea level to about 1,600 m, from coastal dunes and dune scrub to the fringes of the mountain forest, in karroid scrub and semi-desert. The leaves and the light grey-brown bark and smell of camphor when crushed and the wood remains fragrant for many years.

USES

Insect repellent
Pieces of wood or twigs are used as insect repellent among clothing, blankets and food. The seeds give off a camphor smell and are burnt to fumigate huts, with fresh leaves and twigs being added to the fire to make more smoke.

Topical application
A soothing ointment made by macerating the leaves in a salve or aqueous cream is used as a treatment for chilblains and sore feet. It can be rubbed onto the area several times a day to ease the discomfort. Some tribes use the ointment for anointing the body in religious ceremonies and as a massage for the legs, particularly before a long journey. It has been described as an anti-

irritant and also been cited for use in cases of oedema.

This Pommie is not going to be too popular in Australia, when I reveal that it is an exceptional plant, which could be favourably compared to the Australian Tea Tree oil (*Melaleuca alternifolia*). On the evidence to date, Leleshwa oil would seem to have a stronger and more powerful disinfectant action.

Hair care
Several African tribes wear garlands of the leaves and rub the fresh leaves into their hair to keep it free of nits and dandruff, as well as for the fragrance it imparts.

Deodorant
The Massia favour the aromatic leaves as a deodorant, and often carry a few sprays.

Aromatherapy
Leaves tucked under the pillow will ensure a peaceful night and prevent bad dreams and soothe a sore throat. The Tswana and Venda use the woolly seeds to stuff pillows, which are considered to be excellent for headaches and sleeplessness. The plant is also mentioned in many texts for its calming effect on restlessness.

Rheumatism
Inhalation of the smoke is believed to be good for rheumatism, and some tribes bathe rheumatic joints in the smoke. The leaves are used as an infusion in bath preparations for the same purpose. The use of the plant as a traditional treatment for pain relief is worthy of further investigation.

Folk lore
Travellers chew a leaf to protect them on their journey, since it is believed to ward off evil influences, especially when they are journeying through a strange country. The Tswana stuff the leaves into their hats or wear a garland of the leaves in the harsh midday sun, and also rub their feet with a handful of the fresh leaves to give them strength on a long journey.

Medicinal uses
The plant is used in the treatment of venereal diseases, indigestion, heartburn, headache, coughs, cold and flu (where it has positive decongestant properties). It is frequently cited for the treatment of asthma. It is seen by several African tribes and many settlers as a treatment for bronchitis and chest ailments. A strong infusion is used in a hot bath for paralysis and cerebral haemorrhage. The plant is also diaphoretic and of use in fevers.

Contraindications
The splinters are poisonous, causing septic sores, which are difficult to heal. However, this is not

a problem once the plant has been extracted.

CONCLUSIONS

It is clearly appropriate that our industry continues to search for new materials, not only for the new marketing angles and technical benefits, but also for the opportunities that such trade can bring to peoples less fortunate than ourselves. The harvest of just one plant can subsequently fund the scientific exploration of the ethnobotany of these African tribes. This in return will deliver new, equally efficacious, and proven tribal medicinal plants to enrich our products and keep alive the very font of that knowledge. The material should be commercially available by the end of the year.

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