

Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA)



CANSA Fact Sheet on Honeybush Tea

Introduction

Honeybush, or 'Heuningbos' in Afrikaans, (locally known as 'Kus tea') is a genus of flowering plants in the legume family, *Fabaceae*, of the subfamily *Faboideae*. The description was published by Étienne Pierre Ventenat in 1808. The name *Ibbetsonia*, published two years later, is regarded as a synonym of this.

The Honeybush plant grows only in small areas in the southwest and southeast of South Africa and has many similarities with Rooibos Tea.

[Picture Credit: Honeybush]

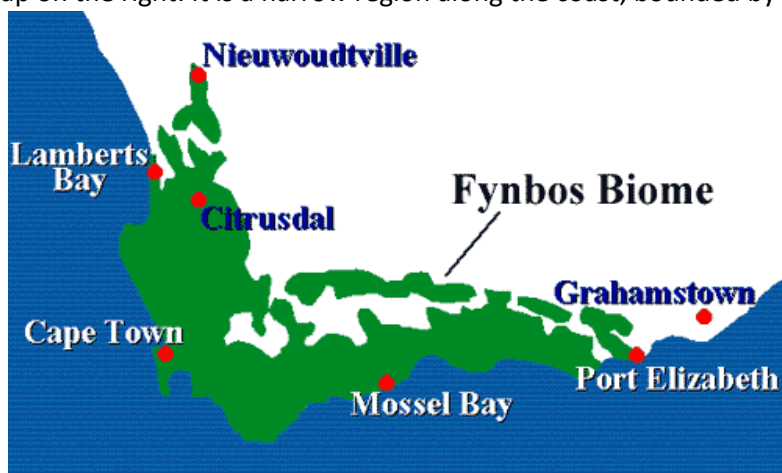


Honeybush is so named because the flowers smell of honey.

The taste of Honeybush Tea is similar to that of Rooibos Tea but a little sweeter. In some rural districts it used to be common practice to keep a kettle of Honeybush Tea infusing on the stove ready for drinking while scenting the whole house – unlike tea prepared from *Camellia sinensis*, the product does not turn bitter with long-term simmering.

The plant is a shrub of the *Fabaceae* family (Leguminosae) that grows in the fynbos botanical zone (biome), indicated in green in the map on the right. It is a narrow region along the coast, bounded by mountain ranges. Fynbos is a vegetation type, characterised mainly by woody plants with small leathery leaves (fynbos is from the Dutch, meaning fine leaved plants).

[Picture Credit: Honeybush Tea Fynbos Biome]



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December 2025

Taxonomy

Scientific Name	Cyclopia genistoides (L.) R.Br.
Higher Classification	Dicotyledons
Family	FABACEAE
Synonyms	Cyclopia galioides E.Mey., Cyclopia genistoides (L.) R.Br. var. genistoides, Cyclopia genistoides (L.) R.Br. var. heterophylla (Eckl. & Zeyh.) Harv., Cyclopia genistoides (L.) R.Br. var. linearifolia Eckl. & Zeyh., Cyclopia genistoides (L.) R.Br. var. teretifolia (Eckl. & Zeyh.) Kies, Cyclopia heterophylla Eckl. & Zeyh., Cyclopia teretifolia Eckl. & Zeyh., Galega genistoides (L.) Thunb., Ibbetsonia genistoides Sims, Podalyria genistoides (L.) Willd., Sophora genistoides L.
Common Names	Common Honeybush-tea (e), Gewone Heuningbostee (a), Honeybush Tea (e) (Red List of South African Plants, 2024).

Varieties of Honeybush Tea

There are dozens of species of Honeybush Tea found in the wild, of which mainly 4 or 5 are in widespread home or commercial use.

Out of the 23 honeybush species, only a select few are used for tea production. Among these cultivated species, five stand out as the primary contributors to South Africa's growing honeybush tea production. The remaining Cyclopia species are typically not collected for tea production, although there may be sporadic instances of individuals gathering them for personal consumption at home:



INTERMEDIA

Locally called *bergtee*.

Predominantly foral with a rose perfume (rose petals) note and a hint of cinnamon (sweet spice).

Provides 85% of wild-harvested material.

Until recently, it served as the industry's cornerstone, but cultivated varieties have now taken the lead.



SUBTERNATA

Locally referred to as *vleitee*.

A sweet, fruity and foral character with notes of caramel, apricot and apple crumble (cooked apple combined with cinnamon).

An erect, densely branched small-leaf shrub

Widely distributed, small volumes of tea are wild-harvested

Provides 45% of the cultivated crop annually.



LONGIFOLIA

Known as *van Staden tea*.

A full-bodied tea with apricot and rose geranium notes and a hint of bitter.

A laxly-branched, straggling medium-leaf shrub.

Only cultivated longifolia is permitted for harvesting as in the wild it is a TOPS-listed species.

Provides about 45% of the annual cultivated volume.



MACULATA

Known as *Genadendal tee*.

Characterised by the basic aroma profile of honeybush; sometimes with a hint of cinnamon.

Known for its distinctive spotted needle-like leaves.

Small volumes of wild harvested material and small areas under cultivation.

Makes up about 5% of annual cultivated production.



GENISTOIDES

Locally known as *Kus tee*.

A full-bodied tea with apricot and rose geranium notes and a hint of bitter.

Characterised by its resemblance to the Genista plant.

Known as the 'original' Honeybush tea because it occurs in the Western Cape in areas which were first settled by Europeans.

No longer wild harvested. Cultivated in the Western Cape on the Agulhas plain, makes up about 5% of annual cultivated production.

Some species can be cultivated whereas others have resisted all attempts at cultivation and must be harvested in the wild. It is not always easy to discover what the seeds need to enable them to germinate; some kinds bear elaiosomes (see below) and might be dependent on the services of particular ants or birds.

Cyclopia intermedia (mountain tea) is one of the teas that is harvested in the Kouga mountains where it grows naturally. Mountain tea regenerates within three years after harvesting or devastation by fire; consequently, less than one third of the mountain yield is available for harvesting each year by rotation.

Elaiosomes are fleshy structures that are attached to the seeds of many plant species. The elaiosome is rich in lipids and proteins, and may be variously shaped.

Many plants have elaiosomes that attract ants, which take the seed to their nest and feed the elaiosome to their larvae. After the larvae have consumed the elaiosome, the ants take the seed to their waste disposal area, which is rich in nutrients from the ant frass and dead bodies, where the seeds germinate. This type of seed dispersal is termed *myrmecochory* from the Greek 'ant' (myrmex) and 'dispersal' (kore).

(South African Honeybush Tea Association, No date).

Nutritional Facts of Honeybush Tea

According to the Department of Chemistry of the University of the Free State, Honeybush Tea contains the following nutritional components:

Typical Nutritional Information: Per 100ml:

Energy (kJ): 1051

Protein (g): 8.7

Carbohydrate (g): 25

of which Total Sugar (g): 3

Total Fat (g): 0.9

of which Saturated Fat (g): 0.3

Cholesterol (mg): -

Dietary Fibre (g): 55.3

Sodium (mg): 270

(Faithful To Nature, 2020).

Health Benefits of Honeybush Tea

Honeybush Tea is made as a simple herbal infusion. One of its early recognised benefits as a tea substitute is its lack of caffeine, which makes it especially suited for nighttime consumption and for those who experience nervousness and want to avoid ordinary tea. As a result, it had a reputation as a calming beverage, though it may not have any specific sedative properties. It also has a low content of tannins, so it does not make a highly astringent tea, which can be a problem with some grades of black or green tea or when ordinary tea is steeped too long.

The traditional use of the tea for treating cough may be explained, in part, by its content of pinitol, a modified sugar (a methyl group replaces hydrogen in one position of glucose) that is similar to inositol. Pinitol, named for its major source, pine trees, is also found in the leaves of several legume plants; it is an expectorant. Pinitol is also of interest for apparent blood-sugar lowering effects, as demonstrated in laboratory animal studies (it may increase the effects of insulin), and is being considered as a drug for diabetes. Honeybush also contains flavones, isoflavones, coumestans, luteolin, 4-hydroxycinnamic acid, polyphenols, and xanthenes. These ingredients serve as antioxidants and may help lower blood lipids.

The isoflavones and coumestans are classified as phytoestrogens, used in the treatment of menopausal symptoms, an application for which honeybush has recently been promoted. The flavones and isoflavones of Honeybush are similar to those in soy, another leguminous plant, also used in treatment of menopausal symptoms.

Luteolin is the primary yellow pigment of the flowers and has been used historically as a dye (most often obtained for this purpose from the plant called Dyer's Weld, *Reseda luteola*). (Dharmananda, S., 2004; Marnewick, et al., 2003; van der Walt, 2000; Kamara, et al., 2003).

Anti-Cancer Benefits

Honeybush tea has anti-cancer benefits.

Samodien, S., de Kock, M., Joubert, E., de Beer, D., Kriel, J., Gelderblom, W.C.A. & Lilly, M. 2024.

“The anti-cancer potential of *Cyclopia* species (honeybush) has been demonstrated in several models. The present study investigated the effects of aqueous and polyphenol-enriched (PE) extracts of *C. subternata* and *C. genistoides*, as well as mangiferin and hesperidin, on different cell growth parameters in human liver (HepG2) and colon (HT-29) cancer cells. Mangiferin and hesperidin were most abundant in *C. genistoides* and *C. subternata*, respectively. *Cyclopia subternata* extracts had the highest ferric-reducing antioxidant capacity. Following exposure of the cells to the extracts and compounds, cell viability, proliferation, and death (apoptosis and autophagy) were determined. *Cyclopia subternata* extracts reduced cell viability and inhibited cell proliferation the most, associated with depletion of ATP. In HepG2 cells, the PE extracts were less effective than the aqueous extracts in reducing cell viability but more effective in inhibiting cell proliferation. Despite disrupting cell growth, none of the extracts induced apoptosis. The aqueous extracts affected autophagy in both cancer cells. Disruption of mitochondrial membrane integrity by the different extracts, presumably via polyphenol/iron interactions, is postulated to be involved; however, mangiferin and hesperidin had no effect, suggesting that other polyphenols and/or complex interactions between compounds are likely responsible for the differential cytotoxic and/or cytoprotective effects of the extracts.”

Conflict of interest statement

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Honeybush Tea is said to have no negative side effects - Honeybush tea, grown in South Africa, has no negative side effects whatsoever. Other key health benefits of Honeybush Tea include:

- Caffeine-free
- Very low tannin levels
- It is very soothing and calms the central nervous system
- Eases constipation
- Can be applied topically to skin irritations
- Full of antioxidants to guard against free radical attack
- Contains polyphenols that boost the immune system and to help reduce the degenerative effects of lifestyle diseases
- Is a source of iron, potassium, calcium, copper, zinc, magnesium, manganese, and sodium

Properties that enhances health

Honeybush Tea possesses numerous properties that enhance the health of people that use it: Isoflavones & Coumestans

The dietary phyto-oestrogen-hormone-dependant process. This is advantageous for:

- Regulation of menstruation cycles
- Prevention of breast, prostate and Uterus cancer
- Reduces the risk of Osteoporosis
- Anti-fungal properties
- Anti-virus properties
- Anticholesterolemic-lowers cholesterol levels
- Hypolipemic-lowers fat levels
- Anti-microbial
- Anti-oxidant

Specific Luteolin is anti-spasmodic and antioxidant. 4-Hydroxycinnomic acid is anti-fungus and Antihepatotoxic.

Xanthones

- Anti-inflammatory
- Anti-hepatotoxic – works against kidney poisoning
- Anti-virus
- Anti-diarrhoea
- Anti-fungus
- Anti-oxidants
- Anti-depressant

Flavones

- Vitamin-type activity (mixture of eriodictyol and hesperidien)
- Anti-oxidants
- Anti-microbial
- Anti-virus
- Anti-inflammatory
- Spasmolytic
- Diuretic (increases Urinating)
- Non-feeding sweeteners

Research on Honeybush Tea has only started recently in the 1990's and already great progress was made on testing and researching the medicinal values of this tea. De Nysschen, *et al* found three major phenolic compounds in Honeybush tealeaves in 1995: a xanthone c-glycoside, mangiferin and O-glycosides of hesperitin and isosakuranetin, two flavanones.

Honeybush Tea improves the immune system - Honeybush Tea is a natural source of many antioxidants, including major phenolic compounds. Phenolic compounds play a significant role in protecting the immune system from oxidative stress, which could damage cells, according to a 2013

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review published in “Nutrients.” Phenolic compounds also modulate the immune system, which helps the body’s natural defenses against infections. This may be responsible for the belief that Honeybush Tea is effective in relieving colds, influenza and other diseases (Livestrong).

Honeybush Tea protects from inflammatory diseases - evidence also exists that the phenolic compounds in Honeybush Tea are able to reduce inflammation and prevent the development of chronic inflammatory diseases. Phenolic compounds have a direct effect on down-regulating the body’s inflammatory response, as demonstrated in inflamed intestinal cells similar to those seen in inflammatory bowel disease, according to a December 2010 study published in “Chemico-Biological Interactions.” This makes Honeybush Tea effective in providing short-term inflammatory relief as well as helping to prevent or ameliorate inflammatory diseases like IBD or Crohn's disease (Livestrong).

Women's Health - Honeybush Tea is valuable to women's health, according to Montego Rooibos Herbal Tea, because it helps regulate periods and reduces the risk of osteoporosis and cancer of the breast and uterus.

Good for gastrointestinal health – people suffering from digestive problems can benefit from drinking Honeybush Tea. It can be taken to alleviate heartburn, nausea and constipation. It can also help cure constipation. It treats abdominal cramps and colic pain in infants.

(Ajuwon, O.R., Ayeleso, A.O. & Adefolaju, G.A. 2018; WebMD, 2025; Healthline, 2025; Malongane, F., McGaw, L.J., Olaokun, O.O. & Mudau, F.N. 2022; Petrova, A., Davids, L.M., Rautenbach, F. & Marnewick, J.L. 2011; Shimbo, H., Fukagawa, A., Nakamura, O., Murakami, S., Miura, Y., Hattori, M., DE Beer, D., Joubert, E. & Yoshida, T. 2024; Sissing, L., Marnewick, J., de Kock, M., Swanevelder, S., Joubert, E. & Gelderblom, W. 2011).

Downsides of Honeybush Tea

None whatsoever as no negative side effects have ever been reported, therefore, Honeybush Tea can be drunk freely. If Honeybush is brewed or boiled for longer than ten minutes, the antioxidant activity becomes even much higher.

(Van der Merwe, J.D., de Beer, D., Swanevelder, S., Joubert, E. & Gelderblom, W.A.A. 2017).

Summary for the Average Reader

Honeybush tea is a naturally caffeine-free herbal tea indigenous to South Africa, known for its mild, sweet, and honey-like flavour. It is rich in antioxidants and minerals and offers several potential health benefits.

Key Benefits & Properties

- **Caffeine-Free & Low Tannin:** Honeybush tea contains no caffeine, making it ideal for nighttime consumption, and its low tannin content means it does not become bitter with prolonged brewing.
- **Rich in Antioxidants:** It is a source of polyphenols, xanthones (like mangiferin), and flavanones, which help protect cells from damage caused by free radicals, reduce inflammation, and support the immune system.
- **Potential Health Benefits:** Research suggests it may help lower blood sugar levels and manage type 2 diabetes due to a compound called pinitol, and some studies indicate potential anti-cancer and anti-fungal properties.

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- **Mineral Content:** It naturally contains essential minerals like manganese, magnesium, iron, potassium, calcium, copper, and zinc, which contribute to overall well-being and bone health.

Brewing Instructions

To prepare a cup of honeybush tea:

1. Use one tea bag or a small amount of loose-leaf tea per cup.
2. Add freshly boiled water to the tea.
3. Allow it to infuse for a minimum of 3 minutes, but for optimal flavor and to increase its antioxidant activity, you can brew it for 8–10 minutes or longer.
4. Enjoy it hot on its own, with milk or a spoonful of honey, or chill it to make a refreshing iced tea (AI Overview, 2025).

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