



Tarata

Pittosporum eugenoides

Family: Pittosporaceae. Tarata is endemic to New Zealand and is its largest *Pittosporum*.



Identification & Cultivation: Tarata is a smaller-sized NZ native tree that grows up to 10 metres tall and is also known as lemonwood because its crushed leaves have a distinct lemon scent. The trunk is narrow and has a dense bracket crown. The leaves are glossy, dark and leathery with a light green midrib. The tree produces small, yellow, sweet-smelling flowers in spring, followed by small red berries that attract various birds in summer. Leaf buds are covered in dark-edged scales. Fruit is pointed, 5-6mm long, and splits into two to show a papery layer covering black sticky seeds. Tarata is found throughout New Zealand from sea to subalpine zones. It grows in a wide variety of habitats such as forests, shrubland and coastal areas.

Parts used: The main parts used from the tarata tree are its gum/resin, leaves, flowers, and wood. The wood, being hard and durable, supports small-scale crafts such as tool handles and traditional Māori musical instruments like glued trumpets.

Tarata resin, prized for its lemon scent, has diverse uses in traditional Māori culture, primarily as a fragrant perfume/hair oil (mixed with oils/fats), a natural chewing gum for fresh breath (often mixed with *pūhā*), an antiseptic for wounds, and a strong adhesive (glue) for mending objects like tools or ornaments, including making instruments.

Commercially, the leaves yield an essential oil rich in octyl acetate (up to 33%) and terpinen-4-ol, which is extracted for use in perfumes and aromatic products.

Constituents: Tarata is rich in aromatic compounds, primarily octyl acetate (up to 33%), along with terpinen-4-ol and decanol, giving its crushed leaves a unique citrusy, fruity scent with hints of mint and orange blossom. This lemonwood aroma combination is very unusual for this genus and the chemicals are different to those found in other citrus-scented species. The major component of the oil, octyl acetate, is also an abundant component of the essential oils of *Heracleum* and *Boswellia* species. Other constituents found across the *Pittosporum* genus include terpenoids, saponins, flavonoids, lignans, and various other phytochemicals, but the core aroma of Tarata comes from that specific ester/alcohol mix.¹

Therapeutic Actions: The leaves of the tarata have been noted for their traditional medicinal uses as an antiseptic and for their potential antibacterial and antifungal properties. The claim regarding antiparasitic properties is less directly documented in scientific literature specific to *Pittosporum eugenoides*, but the leaves contain bioactive chemicals that deter insects like aphids.²

Medicinal uses: Tarata was used in traditional Māori medicine for its pleasant lemon scent and healing properties, primarily for sore throats (gum and leaf tea), aching joints (bark/leaf decoction for baths), and as an antiseptic, with its gum acting as breath freshener. Tarata is an important tree used for medicinal purposes in Māori culture. The bark and leaves were used to treat various ailments, including stomach irritations, coughs, and colds. Leaves were boiled into a tea or infusion for treating colds, coughs, and respiratory issues, including sore throats.

Dosage: Tincture 1:5 Recommended dose: 10 - 15 drops per day (supports the throat)
May be poured into a bath to help support pain from rheumatism.²

Culinary Uses: Tarata is used culinarily in New Zealand for its lemony scent, primarily to impart flavor when smoking fish (trout, tuna) and in traditional hangi cooking. Tarata offers a distinct, fresh flavor profile, making it a valued native ingredient for enhancing both savory and sweet dishes with a natural citrus essence.³

Lemonwood Mocktail

Jan Smith

I have used lemonwood leaves (Tarata) to make a bitters tincture. Instead of alcohol, glycerol (glycerine) was used and whizzed together with fresh lemonwood leaves. If this is strained after 30 minutes, the solution has a fresh, lemony flavour. However, if it is left to infuse for 12 hours before straining, the result is a bitter solution. Bitters can aid our digestive system and overall health.

Lemonwood (Tarata) Mocktail

A NZ version of Lemon, Lime, and Bitters

Ingredients

5-6 drops of Lemonwood bitters

2 Tablespoons of Lemon Balm syrup (equal quantities of lemon balm leaves, sugar, and water which are heated until the sugar dissolves, and then cooled and strained.)

A squeeze of lime juice

Gingerale/Gingerbeer to top up

Directions

Mix all together.

History & Mystery:

Natural Chewing Gum: One of the most notable historical "mysteries" is the use of the tree's resinous gum. Māori people would roll the gum, sometimes mixed with the sap of *pūhā* (sow thistle), into a ball and chew it to freshen breath. This gum was highly prized and, according to some reports, a single ball could last for generations, being passed down.⁴

Cultural Practices: The wood and branches had symbolic and spiritual uses as well. A *tohunga* (Māori expert/priest) might use a tarata branch in ceremonies to lift *tapu* (sacred restrictions) or as a warning sign to an approaching war party.

References:

1. (PDF) Aromatic Components of the Leaves of the New Zealand Lemonwood Tree *Pittosporum eugenoides*
2. Giffney+&+Hodge+2023.pdf
2. Tarata Tincture 1:5 100ml – Self Heal Limited
3. The Taste of Aotearoa: Maori Native Ingredients to Bring the Heat, Spice and Flavour | AGFG
4. Lemonwood – *Pittosporum eugenoides* – The Meaning of Trees

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Advisory Note: This text is given as a general guidance. If any adverse reactions occur or symptoms persist, please contact a qualified medical herbalist or medical doctor immediately