

The Honeybush Industry

What is Honeybush?

Honeybush, also known as "heuningbos" in Afrikaans, is part of the fynbos biome (*Cyclopia spp.*), meaning "fine bush". With yellow, pea flowers, and a characteristic sweet honey-like scent, Honeybush was:

- ◆ 1705: first documented as being used by man;
- ◆ 1881: first scientific research undertaken;
- ◆ 1992: first investigated for cultivation; and
- ◆ 1999: South African Honeybush Tea Association (SAHTA) formed and official Honeybush Industry launched.

What is it used for?

Honeybush is mainly used to make herbal tea, using the leaves and stems. It has a pleasant, mild sweet, honey-like taste and aroma and also:

- ◆ Contains no caffeine;
- ◆ Has a lower tannin content than oriental teas;
- ◆ Is used as flavourings in ready-to-drink beverages such as ice tea, fruit juice blends and sweets; and



- ◆ Contains antioxidants – meaning significant potential for the food, cosmetic and nutraceutical industries.

Unique to South Africa

All 23 species of Honeybush are native to the South African fynbos, and are found in the Western and Eastern Cape Provinces. They grow in a narrow region along the coast, bounded by the Cedarberg Mountains in the North, the Cape Peninsula in the South and Port Elizabeth to the East.

Growing Honeybush

Three species of Honeybush are mainly used commercially by the industry, namely *Cyclopia intermedia* ("Bergtee"), *C. genistoides* ("Kustee") and *C. subternata* ("Vleitee"). Of these, *C. intermedia* contributes the largest market share, but is almost exclusively harvested from the wild, making *C. subternata* and *C. genistoides* the main cultivated species.

The Industry

Originally a cottage industry, Honeybush tea was mainly a traditional source of employment and income for local people, and limited to personal consumption. Today, the natural Honeybush populations have diminished due to the continual (and unsustainable) harvesting. Commercial cultivation has been encouraged, although this is still very limited. Facts about the Honeybush Industry:

- ◆ Approximately 75% of the annual harvest is based on wild harvested Honeybush;
- ◆ 10 growers cultivate Honeybush – seven are commercial, and three community based;



- ◆ Five processors prepare/pack the harvested material and five companies market the tea;
- ◆ In 2008, more than 85% of the total harvest of 200 tons was exported to the UK, the Netherlands, the USA and Germany;
- ◆ The export market is divided into conventional, organic (including both wild and cultivated) and green tea; and
- ◆ All wild harvested Honeybush could potentially be certified as organic, and Honeybush is also cultivated using organic principles.

Challenges

The main challenges facing the Honeybush industry currently are:

- ◆ Demand for Honeybush exceeds supply; and
- ◆ Natural/wild populations of Honeybush are threatened by extinction due to unsustainable harvesting.

To counter this, conservation measures are needed to protect the threatened wild populations. Both the number of commercial growers and the area under cultivation need to be expanded, to enable the supply of Honeybush tea to be increased. Cultivated Honeybush species also need to be improved through breeding programmes and improved cultivation methods, and rigorous research is needed to provide scientific evidence to substantiate the numerous health benefits claimed, to enable it to compete internationally.

**For more information
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