

# SURVIVAL PAPER

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## **THE EUCALYPTUS TREE: A SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA ARBOREAL DENIZEN FROM DOWN-UNDER** Christopher Nyerges

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Here in Southern California, the eucalyptus trees are such a common part of the landscape that many residents assume they are native trees. They blend well into Southern California's Mediterranean landscape, and are relatively immune to pests.

Originally brought here from Australia about 150 years ago, it was believed that this quick-growing tree would be a good timber tree for railroads and other applications. This proved not to be the case, as the twisting grain of eucalyptus made it unsuitable for most building projects.

Eucalyptus is generally thought of as a medicinal tree rather than a food-source, though there are a few foods available from the plant. Perhaps the most interesting is a common bug that is seen on the leaves, appearing as small white bumps. This is actually a psyllid, a small scale-like creature that Aboriginal children in Australia would scrape off the leaves with their teeth to get a good sugar source. Sparrows, jays, robins, and other local birds all fed on this sticky sweet white substance.

At my wild food outings, I have participants pick off the leaves and chew the white sweet bugs. A few people refuse to do so, but this is really one of the most pleasant ways to eat bugs. You can also put a psyllid-infested eucalyptus leaf into a cup of hot water, and end up with sweetened eucalyptus tea.

In fact, a tea from the leaves of any eucalyptus species (with or without the psyllids) can be infused and used as a pleasant beverage.

The Mallees, Australian dwarf species of eucalyptus, were once an important staple food for the Australian aborigines, and a "survival" food for a number of explorers. Surface roots would be cut -- usually pieces several meters long and 2.5 cm. diameter. One end of these porous root sections would then be blown into, and an astringent sap would bubble out the other end. The "water" from these roots is to the Australian desert what cactus juice is to the Southwest U.S. deserts. Of all the mallees used this way, *E. dumosa*, *E. gracilis*, *E. incrassata*, *E. oleosa*, and *E. microtheca* were said to be the best water-producers.

The roots of several mallee species were dried, powdered, and eaten. The best are said to be *E. caesia*, *E. dumosa*, and *E. gracilis*. The finely powdered seeds of one mallee, *E. microtheca*, have been reportedly used for food.

In Australia (as well as here in Southern California), the eucalyptus provides nectar and pollen to bees, who in turn provide honey and beeswax. Beehives that I've kept near a Eucalyptus grove in my Los Angeles back yard have produced a honey as dark as molasses and extremely fragrant. I use this honey as a medicine as much as a sweetener, and find that if I have a cold or sore throat, I feel much better after using this honey in my drinks.

The young fruits can be sucked for sore throats. According to Alma R. Hutchens, author of Indian Herbology of North America, "Among the diseases in which it is employed are croup, diphtheria, bronchitis, asthma, piles, neuralgia, malarial diseases, catarrh, in subacute or chronic inflammation of the urinary organs, ulcers and sores. It has proven an effective remedy in some cases of rheumatism. For some, the mode of using it in asthma is to smoke the dried leaves." (I've never tried this last use).

The tea of eucalyptus leaves, well known for its efficacy in dealing with sinus congestion, also has sufficient antiseptic properties that it can be used to clean wounds. In fact, though there are many species of eucalyptus with many distinct uses throughout Australia, the two primary uses for eucalyptus are the tea from the leaves for all breathing-related problems, and a tea from the bark used to wash and disinfect wounds.

Eucalyptus oil (obtained from the leaves by distillation) is rich in the therapeutic agent cineole. Cineole is used as an active ingredient in inhalants, gargles, lozenges, etc., because it has a pleasant odor and is efficient in killing bacteria. Rutin, used medicinally for diabetes and high blood pressure, occurs in the leaves of some eucalyptus. You have consumed this anytime you've had eucalyptus cough drops (by whatever name).

We have taken the caps off some of the smaller capsules, and used the powdered insides (which consisted mostly of stamens) as a first aid remedy for cuts. In all cases, this resulted in rapid healing and very little scarring. We suggest that the smaller, unopened capsules be included in first aid kits.

The variously scented eucalyptus leaves (peppermint, lemon, medicinal, etc.) tend to repel insects. A necklace of young fruits is used as a safe flea repellent for cats and dogs.

The unique digeridoo musical instrument is made from an approximately four to five foot length of a straight eucalyptus limb. A bug will sometimes eat its way through the central pith of eucalyptus, making it easy to hollow out. Once hollow, one blows into it at one end to create a droning, horn sound.

Whole books have been written on the many uses of this valuable plant. We've only scratched the surface here. One good book for further information is *Bush Food: Aboriginal Food and Herbal Medicine* by Jennifer Isaacs Lansdowne Publishing Pty. Ltd., Sydney, 1987).

These evergreen trees and shrubs are possibly the most widely planted non-native plants in California. Some of the varieties have become common ornamentals because they are beautiful, fast-growing, and drought-tolerant. The height of Eucalypti range from 10 to 150 feet. Most have a grey-green appearance, with the overall shape varying from bushy and weeping to slender and vertical with a full-crowned top. In order to identify a particular variety, it is necessary to observe the bark, leaves, buds, flowers, and fruits.

It is also more difficult to garden under the areas where eucalypti are growing. Your garden plants will produce smaller fruit or tubers, and the plants will require more fertilizer. This is apparently the result of the dispersion of the various eucalyptus oils into the soil. Native to Australia, there are about 90 varieties which have naturalized in California.

