



06 Jun 2019

Launceston Examiner, Launceston

Author: Tia • Section: General News • Article Type: News Item • Audience : 14,669
Page: 21 • Printed size: 602.00cm² • Region: TAS • Market: Australia • ASR: AUD 4,326
words: 431 • Item ID: 1130155954

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A booming market for Tasmania's super oil

BY TIA

WE ALL know tea tree oil - a natural antibacterial oil native to Australia.

But what about the oil from Tassie native kunzea? Though lesser known than tea tree, kunzea has been used topically by Aboriginal communities in Tasmania to relieve irritated skin and muscular aches and pains for thousands of years.

Kunzea ambigua - sometimes known as tick bush - grows well in Tassie's native bush. Chances are if you haven't noticed its white blossoms, you've gotten a whiff of its gentle, aromatic fragrance.

Kunzea is the active ingredient in many Australian anti-inflammatory creams and balms, soaps and body sprays. Kunzea honey is also on the market and the bush's leaves are used in cooking - a natural flavour enhancer perfect for a succulent, mid-winter roast.

There is such a high demand for the oil that Tasmania can't currently produce enough.

"Internationally, there's a big demand for kunzea - they can't seem to get enough," Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture researcher Chanjoo Park said.

For her PhD, Ms Park is investigating growing techniques that might encourage

kunzea to produce more of its special oils with even higher quality.

"The amount of oil we can currently extract from kunzea leaves and twigs is low, but the quantity available can be affected by nutrients, type of cultivar, seasonal variation and even the pruning style," said Ms Park.

The research is the first project to stem from a new partnership between TIA and Essential Oils of Tasmania (EOT). TIA and EOT have just signed a three-year Memorandum of Understanding to boost research for

the Tasmanian essential oil and plant extracts industry.

"We're all about innovation in the essential oils industry and celebrating the unique wonders of Tasmania's native plants, so this new kunzea project is very exciting," said EOT's Simon Wells

"Not only will the research confirm the health bene-

fits of kunzea and help us communicate those to the world, it will also contribute towards more efficient kunzea production and reduced processing costs. It's fantastic to have a TIA food and plant scientist with a newfound love of kunzea leading the project."

Before arriving in Tasmania, she had only ever heard

of rose, lavender and tea tree oils.

"When I experienced the smell of kunzea oil, I was mesmerised by its unique fragrance and yellow colour. It's fascinating research and there is so much potential. I think Tasmanian kunzea oil will soon be world famous, on par with Australian tea tree oil."



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HIGH DEMAND: TIA PhD candidate Chanjoo Park is figuring out the science behind the special oils of Tasmanian *Kunzea ambigua*. **Picture: Supplied**