

Beyond tinctures and teas

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Balm of Gilead/ Cottonwood (excerpt)

Black Cottonwood in the West and Balsam Poplar in central and eastern Canada, north to Alaska.

Common Name and Scientific Name:

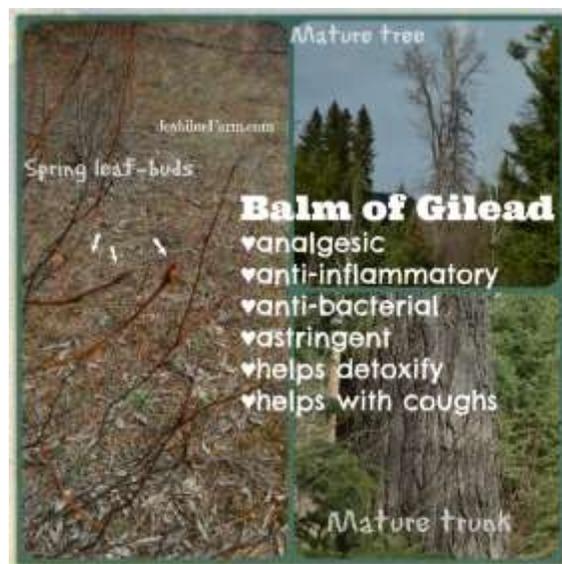
Balm of Gilead

Balm of Gilead comes from the early spring buds of the Balsam Poplar (*Populus balsamifera*), the Black Cottonwood (*Populus trichocarpa*) or the Narrowleaf Balsam Poplar (*Populus angustifolia*). There are several other cottonwoods and poplars native to North America but only these 3 produce the balsam buds and characteristic medicinal scent that you are looking for.

Physical characteristics:

Balm of Gilead is an oil infusion of the spring buds of the Black Cottonwood Tree. It has a balsamic fragrance. The leaf buds, before opening in the spring, exude a sticky, red, camphorous resin that is high in medicinal anti-inflammatory qualities. Once the buds open, the resinous medicinal gum is gone, but the leaves continue to be beneficial as anti-inflammatory herbs, although at a significantly decreased capacity.

It's not uncommon for Black Cottonwood and Balsam Poplar to hybridize with each other where their ranges overlap. Black Cottonwood is the largest of the balsam poplars native to Canada and the largest broadleaf tree in the Western range.



Its leaves are oval, almost heart shaped, and finely toothed. The upper surface of the leaves is dark green on top and silvery green underneath, and usually stained with reddish-brown resin spots. In spring the buds are alternating up the thick twigs with a large terminal bud full of reddish resin at the end of each branch and several smaller buds along the stock.

The young bark is greyish green with prominent lenticels on the trunk. The mature bark has flat topped ridges divided by deep fissures in the wood. The wood is open celled and light weight.

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Historical information:

Used to treat skin problems and lung conditions by the First nations people. In herbalism it is a valued expectorant and antiseptic.

First Nations people in Northern British Columbia tap the poplar tree in late winter and collect the resinous sap.

Growing range:

Western North America along the Pacific coastline, and in South and Central British Columbia, parts of western Alberta, Washington, Montana, and Idaho. It grows at lower to mid elevations and is typically found growing on bottomlands, where it matures to over 160 years of age and reaches up to 35 metres high and 120 cm in diameter. The root system is wide spreading and many young clones can be found growing within 50 meters of the mother tree. The roots penetrate to the water table.

Parts Used:

Unopened Spring buds

Cultivation and Wildcrafting tips:

The tree grows near water and in areas where water is close underground. The mother tree sends out root shoots and many smaller trees that are easy to harvest will surround a very large mother tree, in cleared areas. Harvest no more than 1/3rd of the buds of any one tree and leave the tip bud in untouched to ensure the longevity of the grove. Trees that are fully harvested do not have enough energy to feed the root system and often die off.

Cottonwood trees grow in the same area as willows, trembling aspen, birch, and alder. The old wood is pithy and not suitable for fire wood or building materials.

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Primary Constituents:

Phenolic glycosides (salicin, populin, chrysin); volatile oil (α-caryophyllene, cineole, arcurcumene, bisabolene, farnesene, and others); alkanes; resins; phenolic acids; tannins.

Action:

Buds: Antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, pain relieving, vulnerary, expectorant, astringent, anti-septic, nephritic, demulcent, emollient, counter-irritant, antirheumatic and nutritive

Bark: cathartic, tonic, stimulant, diuretic, alternative, and expectorant.

Body Systems affected:

Respiratory tract, joints, muscles

Preparation and dosage:

An oil infusion is made from the freshly picked buds in spring. Leave the buds macerating in olive oil, warmed by the sunshine, to draw the resin out of the buds slowly. After 4 weeks, strain the oil. This may be used as the foundation of a salve or ointment for muscle aches, pain, and inflammation. It may also be applied externally for dry, scaly skin conditions such as psoriasis and dry eczema.

The buds may be tinctured in alcohol or glycerin and used internally for sore throat, coughs, and laryngitis accompanied by loss of voice. It may also be used to treat bronchitis.

It can be used as an oxymel — an infusion of buds with vinegar to which honey is added. It may be diluted with hot water to make it more pleasant to drink.

Notes:

Gilead is a common name for several plants belonging to different plant families. The North American Balm of Gilead is a species of poplar (*Populus candicans*) which has large balsamic and fragrant buds. The poplar is closely related to, and sometimes considered a variety of, the balsam poplar (*P. tacamahaca*), which has also been called balm of Gilead and tacamahac. The Cottonwood or Balsam poplar should not be confused with the historic Old World balm of Gilead, or Mecca balsam, which is a small evergreen tree (*Commiphora gileadensis*, also once called *C. opobalsamum*) of the family Burseraceae (incense-tree family) native to Africa and Asia.