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Melissa (*Melissa officinalis*) from the island of Hvar

BY Sana Turnock

Plant description: Depending on climatic conditions, the hardy Melissa shrub can grow from 20cm to half a metre in height and produces tiny white to light violet flowers. This plant also goes by the name Lemon Balm.

Where can it be found? Melissa grows all over the island of Hvar, although it grows better at higher altitudes. It can also be found along the Dalmatian coast and throughout Croatia.

Parts Used: Leaves and flowering tops

Colour: clear mobile liquid

Organoleptic test: initial light overtones which soon becomes heady.

Chemical Constituents: The constituents of Melissa from Hvar are not typical of the species. Melissa from Hvar contains compounds from the monoterpene, aldehyde and monoterpenol families: B-pinene (approx 8%); limonene (approx 41%); y-terpene (approx 4.5%); citronellal (approx 16%); and geraniol (approx 9%). This makes the oil from Hvar an excellent insectifuge, antiseptic, nervine sedative, bactericide, expectorant and fungicide.

In comparison, some aromatherapy texts referring to Melissa sourced from regions including France, Egypt, Ireland, Italy and North Africa appear to make no mention of limonene or geraniol although it appears to contain approximately 2% of citronellal. The most common constituents appear to be geranial (16-45%), citronellal (2%), neral (16-28%) and up to 7% B-caryophyllene.

A Summary Table

Melissa (from Hvar) – typical compounds	Typical %	Melissa from France, Egypt, Ireland, Italy, Sardinia, North Africa, North America – common compounds	Typical %
B-pinene	Approx 8%	Citronellal	2%-6.48%
Limonene	Approx 41%	Geranial	15%-45%
y-terpinene	Approx 4.5%	Neral	16%-35%
Citronellal	Approx 16%	B-caryophyllene	5.6% -7%
Geraniol	Approx 9%	Geranyl acetate	0.09%-2%
a-pinene	Trace 0.5%	Germacrene D	0.09%-5%
Linalool	Trace 0.5%	-	-
Iso-pulegol	Trace 0.4%	-	-
Citronellol	Approx 4%	-	-
Nerol	Trace 0.3%	-	-
Neral	Trace 0.8%	-	-
Geranial	1.5%	-	-

A personal perspective on Melissa

Have you ever sat still for a few moments to inhale Melissa oil? Some say it is an overpowering aroma, while for others it produces a relaxed and calm state quite quickly. This is indeed what took place during an aromatherapy course I facilitated in Japan. The group was instructed to inhale a single drop of Melissa oil (from Hvar) from a tissue. They were to remain in a quiet state for about 5 minutes so that their body, mind, spirit and emotions could connect with the aroma. Any observations were to be discussed at the end of the session. We had just finished a half-day workshop and the most significant change produced by the exercise was that people's overstimulated minds became calmer and emptier, and they felt more physically relaxed and at peace. One person, who felt as though the crown area of her head had been congested, felt much lighter afterwards. A pregnant mother found herself feeling quite sleepy. It wasn't surprising to note that as, in her role as course translator, her mind had been extremely active throughout the day. All of this with just a single drop of the oil known as the 'Elixir of Life'.

As a form of research and preparation for this article, I decided to spend time with Melissa. Inhalation was the most convenient way of doing this. Whenever I breathed in its aroma I found it to be heady and at times stupefying. One drop at any given time was always plenty. This elixir had the ability to slow down and calm the mind as well as the breath. This was a super benefit as my mind has a great ability to attach itself to and thrive on mental busyness. It also allowed me to regain my centre and find balance whenever I was stressed or anxious. I wouldn't recommend that you use it neat on the septum (bridge of the nose) as it can prove to be quite irritating.

Its gift to humanity

Melissa is well known as a potent essential oil for acting as a sedative to the central nervous system, calming and balancing anxiety, stress, shock, grief, and emotions in general (I can personally attest to some of those). It is also considered to be an excellent antiseptic, bacteriocide, fungicide and insecticide. It acts as an expectorant for respiratory complaints such as chronic coughs, colds and bronchitis, relieves indigestion flatulence, and colic due to its antispasmodic, carminative and stomachic properties, is known to alleviate nausea and aids in supporting the liver and gall bladder. Like Sweet basil, Melissa is good at preventing cold sores from appearing - as long as you apply it at the tingling stage. A few applications throughout the day are recommended.

How can it be used? It is highly recommended that Melissa be diluted in a carrier such as cream, gel, castile soap, or vegetable oil if it is to be applied topically or added to a bath. It is excellent for inhalations, used in a vaporiser and added to perfumes (in minute amounts).

Indulge yourself

Have a full body massage using only Melissa oil.
1-2 drops Melissa oil
10ml base oil

For All Seasons

Try this light, fresh yet relaxing and calming synergetic blend in a vaporiser or nebuliser. Ideal for sinus sufferers during spring, keeping cold, flu and general respiratory symptoms at bay during winter, keeping it 'light' during balmy summer days and well just because! during the delightful Autumn season.

In a vaporiser

Melissa (officinalis) 1 dr
Sandalwood 3dr
(Santalum spicatum)
Myrtle 2 dr
(Myrtus communis)

In a nebuliser

used at regular intervals for 5-10mins

Melissa (officinalis) 1 dr
Sandalwood 8 dr
(Santalum spicatum)
Red myrtle 8 dr
(Myrtus communis)

Tips and cautions –

- Is potent in aroma and efficacy. One drop in a blend or for inhalation is plenty.
- Can be overpowering and have a stupefying effect, so once again use a minimal amount in preparations.
- Is known to be a skin irritant and skin sensitiser so dilute with a carrier when using it for a bath or general topical application.
- Having a composition made up of more than 50% monoterpenes means that Melissa is highly volatile. As the oil also contains monoterpenols it has more opportunity to evaporate and oxidise faster than essential oils that don't have such a high percentage of the above compounds. So look after Melissa (like citrus oils) by sealing it tightly and keeping it in a cool dark place.
- B-pinene is a monoterpene compound found in Melissa oil from Hvar and is known to assist with respiratory complaints. Ironically enough, there has been evidence to suggest oils containing such a compound could also act as a respiratory irritant restricting airway flow. Asthmatics may need to be aware of this. Interestingly I had a case where an asthmatic found that the only terpene based essential oils that did not restrict her airway were Melissa and Sandalwood (*album*).
- It is one of the most adulterated essential oils in the industry due to cost factors. Ensure your supplier can guarantee purity and quality.

Bibliography

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