



COPAL

Latin Name: *Bursera sp.*, *Protium sp.*

Other Names: Mayan Copal, True Copal, Pom, Black Copal, White Copal, Yellow Copal, Gold Copal

Family: Burseraceae

Parts Used: resin, sap

Aroma: rich, resinous, earthy, sweet, piney-lemony

Organ/System Affiliation: skin, muscular, respiratory

Physiological Effects: analgesic(topical), anti-fungal, antimicrobial, antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, anti-rheumatic, antiseptic, antiviral, astringent, diaphoretic, emmenagogue, expectorant, insect-repellant, vasodilator, vulnerary



TRUE COPAL IS a very hard tree resin used as incense and medicine by tribal healers, and spiritual and religious peoples throughout Mexico, Central and South America.

It is derived from several different species of flowering shrubs and trees native to Mexico, Central America, and northern parts of South America. Copal-producing trees grow anywhere between 10 and 80 feet tall. There is much confusion around the identification of different Copal varieties since the name Copal is also broadly

used around the world to generally describe tree resins that are hardened but have not yet turned into amber (fossilized resin). Therefore, there are many resins named Copal originating from Asia and North America as well. Most of these Copal resins share similar properties but have distinction in their own natures and aromas. The

‘true’ Copal resins, however, originate from Mesoamerica, Columbia, Peru, Venezuela, and Brazil, to name a few.

In indigenous societies from the regions listed above, sap is collected for incense and other holy purposes by making shallow cuts on the trunks

of the trees. A leaf cup is placed at the bottom of the cut to collect the precious ‘blood of the tree’. Often times, tears of the sap dry directly on the tree and are harvested. The resin collected in leaf basins is pounded into a thick paste and traditionally stored in the holy houses. Mainstream harvest methods are similar yet less rich in tradition.



HISTORIES AND STORIES OF COPAL

Copal has a rich history in the celebrations, ceremonies, medicine, and incense traditions of the ancient Maya, Aztecs, and many other First Peoples of Mexico, Central America, and South America. Copal had various uses throughout these regions, ranging from everything spiritual, to practical crafting uses as a binder, glue, and even a building material. Due to its strength and durability, many people would use Copal as a sacred carving medium for holy figurines, deities, amulets, talismans, jewelry or other esoteric items.

To the ancient Maya, the divine God of the Earth extracted Copal resin

from the Tree of Life and gave it to the humans as a gift. It is considered very sacred and is often referred to as “Food of the Gods”. It has been widely used in many spiritual traditions for thousands of years for offerings, divination purposes, connecting to the divine, spiritual healing, and much more. Among the many indigenous tribes of Mexico and Central America, Copal is definitely the most common offering to deities, spirits, and ancestors. In modern Mexican culture, Copal resin is still used as a common offering to the spirit world.

The Apache and Sioux tribes of North America used to trade their crafts for Copal from Mexico, which they

used exclusively in their sweat lodge rituals as a holy incense. Copal is still heavily used today in the Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead celebration in Mexico for its ability to 'ferry the dead' to the afterlife. It has been traditionally used by medicine people in exorcisms, banishing malevolent spirits, cleansing, and smudging. When the Catholic Church came to the Americas, it eventually adopted Copal resin into its rites and rituals, replacing the traditional Frankincense and Myrrh with the local holy incense. Exorcisms and divine uses of Copal were and still are used to this day in hybridized Tribal-Christian religions. In addition to its vast popularity as a spiritual ally, Copal has been used as medicine for several different ailments by tribal healers and shamans of Mesoamerica.

MEDICINAL USES

Copal's strongest medicinal properties are expressed through its external applications for various skin disorders. It is used to treat eczema,

dermatitis, rashes, itch, burns, insect bites, fungal and bacterial infections, and is even an efficient topical analgesic in the treatment of arthritis, rheumatism, gout, and muscular aches and pains.

In many different Native tribes, Copal resin has been used to treat wounds and sores. It keeps the area clean while staving off any possible infections, and is also known to speed up the healing process. Many conventional doctors who have been turned on to the healing properties of Copal by indigenous patients, have begun to incorporate the resin into their practice. Ongoing studies have been proving its many pain-reducing and healing abilities as a topical medicine.

The most common traditional applications of Copal in folk medicine are bathing the patient in its thick plumes of smoke (smudging) or applying an ointment or paste topically. The smoke is applied over the body to cure various illnesses, to protect



against sorcery and misfortune, and to cleanse the body after contact with the ritually unclean, especially sick persons and corpses (Wisdom, 1950).

“Huastec Mayan medicine people use Copal in the treatment of headache, fever, nosebleed, stomach ache, topically for burns, and for predicting rain by its flowering”(Alcorn, 1984). The Guarani people of the Amazon use Copal to treat wounds after battle, indicating its strong protective and healing qualities.

Copal’s ancient use as a fumigant hints at it having decongestant properties. It was often given to patients suffering from asthma, bronchitis, colds, and nasal congestion. The potent aroma of Copal incense is said to relieve anxiety, stress, and depression by soothing troubled thoughts and an over-active mind. At the same time, its uplifting fragrance leaves one with feelings of rejuvenation and invigoration of the spirit. It has also been used as a type of chewing

gum to treat mouth sores, unhealthy gums, gingivitis, and cavities.

MAGICAL AND METAPHYSICAL USES

Copal is traditionally used in ceremonial settings as a clearer of energies. It is used to dispel negative or dark energies and protect participants of rituals against malevolent spirits. In different cultures, it is used to stimulate creativity and imagination and opens one up spiritually to receive visions and higher wisdom from spiritual realms. They say that it has the power to bring light to the darkness of the soul.

There is vast supporting evidence that suggests Copal has been employed to induce trance-like states by shamans and medicine people for centuries, even millennia. It is used for personal energetic and physical protection, and in the protection of property and food stores. Nodules of the resin are often placed in the four corners of store houses and granaries to protect a farmer’s harvest.



Copal is often used by the Chorti, and many other tribes, to assure successful hunting. "Before the hunter sets out, he must have a dream, in which the deer-god informs him of the price he must pay for the animal. He is told that he must pay a certain number of "pesos" of copal gum. The hunter prepares his copal pesos and burns them at midnight before his altar, offering them to both the saints and the deer-god" (Wisdom 1940).

Reading the patterns in the smoke of burning Copal resin is a common form of divination in some areas of the

southern Huasteca region (Sandstorm, 1991). Traditional Otomi healers read the symbols and patterns in the smoke to diagnose a patient's disease. In Mexican Folk traditions, Copal is also used to treat a broken heart. In this case, a ceremony takes place where the use of various spiritual tools prepare the patient energetically before the burning of Copal takes place. As the Copal burns, its smoke bathes the patient, clearing the built-up negative energies that lead to difficult emotions, which dissipate as the smoke clears, bringing balance and light to the emotional and energetic heart.



If you enjoyed this plant monograph and would like 19 more on plants like Frankincense, Balm of Gilead, Palo Santo, Juniper, Patchouli, Agarwood, and Myrrh, I invite you to pick up a copy of my ebook, *Materia Aromatica*. In this unique book is over a decade of my personal experience with plant medicine, aromatherapy, and incense, my deep study of incense traditions and medical systems around the world, work with incense masters from different cultures, and being founder of one of America's most loved incense companies, Higher Mind Incense.

This is the first professional reference of its kind written in English that speaks to the many ancient medical systems and spiritual practices that utilize tree resins and herbs around the world as incense for countless purposes. Within the 100 pages of this guidebook lies powerful insights and precious traditional knowledge for using incense for your own benefit or the benefit of others, whether you use incense in a spiritual or meditation practice, in your aromatherapy or healing practice, or you simply love enjoying incense, or even make your own.

Learn more and claim your copy of *Materia Aromatica* here:

<https://training.aromaticmedicineschool.com/materia-aromatica-ebook>