

## Yerba Santa Tradition and Science

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*Eriodictyon spp.* aka Yerba Santa is an herb I've been wanting to get to know more, as it grows right here in Sedona, AZ where I am currently residing. Here we have *e. angustifolium* which can be used interchangeably with the more well known *e. californicum*, which was the plant listed in the United States Pharmacopeia between 1894-1956 and the National Formulary in 1947.

Native Americans of the Southwest used Yerba Santa to treat a variety of pulmonary conditions, as a wash or bath for fevers, and as a poultice to treat pain. For centuries, the Chumash other California Indians used *e. californicum*, *e. crassifolium* and *e. trichocalyx* in the treatment of pulmonary conditions, saliva production, and to stop bleeding of minor cuts and scrapes. In the United States and Britain, *e. californicum* was formally used for conditions including influenza, bacterial pneumonia, asthma, bronchitis, and tuberculosis starting in the late 1800s until the 1960s, when drug regulations became more stringent around proof of efficacy. Clinical trials to establish efficacy or safety were never systematically conducted. (Natural Standard Database 2014)

“The Spanish who came to early California were so impressed with the plant that they gave it the name Yerba Santa, meaning holy plant. Yerba Santa was introduced to the Spanish Padres at Mission San Antonio de Padua by the

Salinan tribe and it became one of three major medicinal herbs used at the mission.” (USDA n.d.)

Yerba Santa was held in high esteem for many reasons. “It held up throughout the ravages of time, travel, and elemental exposure leading to a reliable herbal medicine.” Unlike other expectorants that tend to increase pulmonary secretions, Yerba Santa has a “distinctive decongestant quality, yet without stimulating cardiovascular functions such as Ephedra”. Its antibacterial effects and bacteriostatic effects from the resinous leaves are effective against gram positive microbes like *TB*, *Strep* and *Sarcina*. (Kane 2011)

Yerba Santa is indicated as a decongestant, expectorant, mucolytic, anticatarrhal, bronchial dilator, carminative, antiseptic, antispasmodic, antioxidant, astringent, digestive, disinfectant and stimulant actions. Internally it’s used to treat cough, cold, flu, chest congestion, urinary tract infection, gas, bloating, asthma, bronchitis, catarrh, cystitis, leucorrhea, vaginitis, diarrhea, dysentery, fever, hay fever, sinusitis, hemorrhoids, pharyngitis, laryngitis, pneumonia, pleurisy, rheumatism, sinus congestion, sore throat, smoker’s cough, tuberculosis, syphilis. Externally, it’s used for broken bones, bruises, sprains, strains, fever, insect bites, stings, poison oak and ivy rash, eczema, as a styptic for sores, rheumatism and partial paralysis. (Slattery 2012)

I was surprised by the lack of research on Yerba Santa effects on the lungs. In one 2011 study, findings show that the eriodictyol found in Yerba Santa may serve as an anti-allergenic agent by inhibiting mast cell degranulation. Most respiratory conditions involve irritation and inflammation. Based on laboratory studies, the flavonoids homoeriodictyol and eriodictyol may

inhibit cytochrome P450 enzymes. Therefore, in theory, this herb may interact with other drugs and herbs also metabolized via CYP450, much like St. John's wort.

Yerba Santa can be prepared as a decoction, a tincture of fresh or dry plant, a syrup, an oxymel (honey, water and vinegar), a poultice, in a steam Inhalation, a douche or bolus, a chew, as a smoke and a smudge.

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