**LABRADOR TEA**

*Ledum groenlandicum*  
[LEE-dum green-LAND-ee-kum]

**Family:** Ericaceae

**Names:** Amerikan Biberiyesi, Bog Labradortea, Michigan Labrador Tea [S], Rusty Labrador-tea,

**Description:** Native to both Greenland and Labrador, Labrador tea grows in thick, knee-to-waist high banks in lowland bogs across northern North America. The shrub’s evergreen foliage resembles that of a rhododendron. The narrowly elliptical leathery leaves are dark green, rusting to magenta with age and roll under at the edges. Yellow fur covering the underside of the leaf and their powerful, lemony aroma when crushed make identification a snap. Showy clusters of small white blossoms on the branch tips in May through August. It is in leaf all year, in flower from April to June. The scented flowers are hermaphrodite and are pollinated by bees. It is noted for attracting wildlife. The leaves and the flowers are very aromatic.

**Cultivation:** Requires a lime-free loam or peaty soil. Prefers a moist humus-rich acid soil in shade or semi-shade. Sphagnum or peat moss bedding recommended. Plants flower more freely when grown in a sunny position. Plants grow better if they have certain fungal associations in the soil. The best way of providing this is to incorporate some soil from around well-growing established plants into the soil for the new plant. Hardy to at least 17°F. Plants benefit from removing the dead flowers before they set seed. This prevents them putting too much energy into seed production at the expense of more flowers and leaves. A good bee plant. Seed is surface sown in a shady part of the greenhouse in February or March. Another report says that the seed is best sown in the autumn as soon as it is ripe. Germination is variable and can be quite slow. Prick out the seedlings into individual pots as soon as they are large enough to handle and grow the pots on in a shady frame for 18 months before planting them out into their permanent positions. Cuttings of half-ripe wood, 5 - 8cm with a heel, July/August in a frame. Plant out in spring. Cuttings of mature wood, November/December in a frame. Layering in the autumn. Takes 12 months. Division is also possible. Harvest year round but the new leaves in spring produce the most flavorful tea. Pick healthy leaves into a cloth bag and hang it indoors for a week or so. The leaves retain
their color, shape and flexibility even moths later. Chop them as fine as commercial loose tea when ready to use.

**History:** Labrador tea was a popular beverage during the American Revolution, when British teas were boycotted. Germans added leaves of *Ledum palustre* to their beer to make it more intoxicating. Europeans placed aromatic *Ledum* leaves in grain boxes and corncribs to discourage mice and rats. The stalks were traditionally hung in closets to repel moths, as well as ghosts and illnesses.

**Properties:** Analgesic; Birthing aid; Blood purifier; Diaphoretic; Diuretic; Kidney; Narcotic; Pectoral; Poultice; Salve; Tonic.

**Constituents:** Andromedotoxin which is a diterpene derivative

**Medicinal Uses:** Pacific Northwest natives use a strong leaf tonic as a blood purifier and treatment for rheumatism. Tribes farther north use the same infusion to combat cold symptoms. They also marinate strong meats in it. In Alaska, Labrador tea has been used to treat stomach ailments, hangovers, and dizziness, as well as pulmonary disorders including tuberculosis. Infusions have also been used as a wash to soothe itching rashes including poison ivy, sores, burns, lice, and leprosy. In modern herbalism it is occasionally used externally to treat a range of skin problems. A tea is taken internally in the treatment of headaches, asthma, colds, stomach aches, kidney ailments etc. Externally, it is used as a wash for burns, ulcers, itches, chapped skin, stings, dandruff etc. An ointment made from the powdered leaves or roots has been used to treat ulcers, cracked nipples, burns and scalds. The plant is apparently a mild narcotic, it was taken by Indian women three times daily shortly before giving birth

**Toxicity:** Plants contain a narcotic toxin called Ledel. This toxin only causes problems if the leaves are cooked for a long period in a closed container. Allergic reactions, such as rashes, can also result from internal use. Use in moderation only.

**Cosmetic Uses:** Labrador tea leaves are astringent and useful for facial steams and after-facial splashes. For a sore muscle liniment, soak the leaves and flowers in alcohol with devil’s club root and nettle leaves. The leaves are pleasant to use in saunas.

**Other Uses:** The leaves are hung up in the clothes cupboard in order to repel insects. The branches are also placed among grain in order to keep mice away. A strong decoction of the leaves, or a tincture, is used to kill lice, mosquitoes, fleas and other insects. The leaves contain tannin which is used to tan hides. A brown dye is obtained from the plant.

**Culinary Uses:** A fragrant and soothing tea is made from the leaves. The spicy leaves make a very palatable and refreshing tea. The North American Indians would often flavor this tea with the roots of licorice fern, *Polypodium glycyrrhiza*. When lemon is added they can be used as iced tea. The leaves were once added to beer in order to make it heady. Some caution is advised. It would be better to brew the tea in cold water by leaving it in a sunny place, or to make sure that it is brewed for a short time only in an open container. The leaves are used as a flavoring, they are a bayleaf substitute. Ground *ledum* is a tasty meat spice; add to marinades for a spicy flavor.

**Recipes:**

**Labrador Tea Mix**

- 2 cups Labrador tea leaves cut fine
- ½ cup rose hips
- ¼ cup water mint leaves
- 3 Tbsp wild ginger leaves or ½ inch gingerroot
- 3 Tbsp orange peel
- 2 Tbsp lemon peel
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 1 tsp cloves

Mix all ingredients well and store in an airtight container. To make a single cup of tea use 2 teaspoons in a tea strainer, cover with boiling water and steep for 10 minutes.
**Labrador-Spruce Toddy**

2 Tbsp Labrador tea leaves
generous double-handful spruce tips
4 cups boiling water
4 Tbsp brandy or cognac

Place Labrador tea leaves and spruce tips in teapot. Add boiling water and steep 5-10 minutes. Strain. Pour into mugs. Add 1 Tbsp brandy or cognac per cup. (Discovering Wild Plants)

**References:**

Plants for a Future Database

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