

Origin of the name 'patchouli' and its history

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India is one of the few countries in the world that has rich cultural practices and health traditions. Its ancient practices still hold the key for many modern-day products and techniques. Patchouli essential oil is one such product that originated and was popularized from Indian indigenous practice. Though the patchouli herb had been used for many centuries in Asian countries, it came to be appreciated in Europe only in 1840s through its unique aroma associated with the exported Indian fabrics. This led to the popularization of patchouli and extraction of its essential oil. The name 'patchouli' also originated in India. Though some information regarding patchouli is already known, this note elucidates the plant's origin, correct nomenclature, its ancient uses, the origin of its name and its popularization in Europe.

The use of herbs to give fragrance in perfumes dates back to the dawn of civilization. Perfumes were in use even before 4500 BC in the Egyptian culture. Many aromatic essential oils such as cassia, cinnamon, artemisia, marjoram, calamus, juniper, frankincense, etc. were used in ancient times for fragrance purposes, frankincense being the most preferred among them. Aromatic herbs were also used in Chinese, Indian and other cultures. In Ayurveda, aromatic herbs in fresh, dried or juice form have been used for healing. Although aromatic herbs were used for many centuries in India, it was the Arabs who introduced the practice of utilizing fragrance in the form of essential oil. Their expertise in distillation paved the way for the genesis of many essential oils such as rose oil, jasmine oil, sandalwood oil, etc. for making attars¹. However, the use of patchouli in the form of essential oil was not reported in any culture of the world, though patchouli herb has been used as medicine in China, and as medicine and insect repellent in India from historic times.

Uses of patchouli herb

Patchouli herb (Figure 1) has been used in the major medical systems of the world, viz. traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurveda for both external and internal applications². In Chinese medicine, it has been used for centuries as decoction with other drugs for treating cold, nausea, diarrhoea, dermatitis, vomiting, abdominal pain, headache, fever, dampness and to stimulate appetite³⁻⁷. In India, in the ancient times, leaves of the patchouli plant had been primarily used as insect repellent to keep insects away from garments⁸⁻¹⁰.

Importance of patchouli essential oil

Patchouli oil, extracted from the dried leaves and young twigs of *Pogostemon cablin* (Blanco) Benth. (Lamiaceae) is one of the important essential oils extensively used in perfumery. Apart from its characteristic heavy, woody, earthy and camphoraceous odour, it has long-lasting and strong fixative properties. The main and important chemical compounds of patchouli oil are patchouli alcohol, α -bulnesene, sychelene, β -caryophyllene, α -guaiene, norpatchoulene, α -patchoulene, β -patchoulene and pogostol^{11,12}. The odour of patchouli oil is said to be more powerful than any other essential oil obtained from plants^{13,14}. It blends well with other essential oils and imparts strength, alluring odour and long-lasting qualities to other essential oils and perfumes and helps prevent rapid evaporation of perfumes. Since it has strong fixative and long-lasting properties, it is widely used as an important base ingredient in many fragrant products. It is also used as a flavouring agent in low concentration in alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, baked food, candy and frozen dairy desserts, gelatins, puddings, meat and meat products^{3,4}. In addition, patchouli oil possesses anti-inflammatory, antiseptic, antibacterial, antifungal, antidepressant and insect repellent properties^{2,3,7,9,15}.

Nomenclature of patchouli plant

Patchouli plant, *P. cablin* is indigenous and native to the Philippines¹⁶. It was first described in 1837 as *Mentha cablin* Blanco from the Philippines by Francisco Manuel Blanco in *Flores de Filipinos*

(Flora of Philippines). The word *cablin* is derived from *cablan*, which is the vernacular name of this species in the Philippines^{16,17}. Later, this plant was transferred to its proper genus and renamed *P. cablin* by Bentham in 1848. Patchouli has been differently named by different botanists. In 1845, Pelletier described and illustrated this species grown in the hothouse in France as *P. patchouly*. In 1847, Tenore described the patchouli plant grown in Italy as *P. suavis*. In 1849, William Hooker¹³ also described and illustrated patchouli grown in Botanic Garden, Kew, as *P. patchouli*. It was also described as *P. javanicus* Back. & Adelb. by Backer and Adelbert in 1954. J. D. Hooker described Indian patchouli plant, *Pogostemon heyneanus* Benth., which is indigenous to India (the Western Ghats) and Sri Lanka, as *P. patchouli* in the Flora of British India, where the patchouli plant (*P. cablin*) is described as *P. patchouli* var. *suavis*¹⁸. Since the patchouli plant and Indian patchouli plant have been described and referred by the single name, *P. patchouli*, there is confusion on the identity. *P. heyneanus* is distinct and is different from *P. cablin*. However, all the names such as



Figure 1. *Pogostemon cablin* (Blanco) Benth.

P. patchouly, *P. patchouli*, *P. suavis*, *P. patchouli* var. *suavis* and *P. javanicus* refer to a single plant, *P. cablin*, which is patchouli of commerce.

Patchouli in ancient China

Although patchouli has been used in Chinese medicine for centuries, the *Flora of China* reveals that it is not indigenous to China¹⁹. It is stated that patchouli was introduced into China for medicinal uses during AD 420–589 and later it was cultivated in the Guangdong Province of southern China around the 11th century^{2,5,20}. However, it is not clear when the Philippines plant reached China. *Lophanthus rugosus* Fisch. & C.A. Mey. [= *Agastache rugosa* (Fisch. & C.A. Mey.) Kuntze] and *Microtoena patchoulia* (C.B. Clarke ex Hook.f.) C. Y. Wu et Hsuan (Lamiaceae), which are indigenous to China, have been used in Chinese medicine for many centuries for various ailments^{5,6,16,21,22}. As patchouli looks similar and has odour similar to those of these two species^{5,6,16}, the Chinese may have started using patchouli in place of *L. rugosus*. Since patchouli was initially cultivated in Guangdong Province, in Chinese it has been called ‘Guang-Huo-Xiang’ to differentiate it from *L. rugosus*, which is called ‘Huo-Xiang’^{2,5,7}.

Introduction of patchouli (*P. cablin*) into India

Some researchers believe that the patchouli plant originated in India^{5,23}. But it is not indigenous to India and it was introduced here only in 1834. To a query in 1888, relating to the ‘actual’ source of patchouli, the then Keeper of the Herbarium of the Royal Gardens, Kew, Daniel Oliver opined that the true patchouli of commerce (*P. cablin*) was not indigenous to any part of India. George King, the then Superintendent (1871–1897) of the Royal Botanic Garden, Calcutta (now the Indian Botanic Garden, Howrah), also affirmed that this plant was not indigenous to India, but it had been introduced into the Royal Botanic Garden, Calcutta from Straits Settlement¹⁴. This plant was introduced in 1834 when Nathaniel Wallich was the Superintendent of the Royal Botanic Garden, Calcutta (1817–1842). He received the patchouli plants from G. Porter, the then in-charge of Botanic

Garden at Penang, Straits Settlements, where it was cultivated¹⁶. Before botanically describing this species, i.e. in 1837, it was introduced into India in 1834 as the ‘patchouli’ plant.

Origin of the name ‘patchouli’

P. heyneanus, the Indian patchouli plant, was first described and illustrated as *Cottam* by van Rheede in 1690 in *Hortus Malabaricus*²⁴. Bentham described *P. heyneanus* in 1830 based on the specimens collected by Heyne from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). This plant is indigenous to peninsular India and Sri Lanka. It is widely distributed in the Western Ghats. Earlier, this species was widely cultivated in home gardens for medicinal purposes in peninsular India^{16,24}. Earlier, names such as ‘patcha’, ‘patchapat’ or patchouli were invariably applied to any plant that had the characteristic patchouli odour, in the Indian markets. *M. patchoulia* and *P. heyneanus* were also sold as patchapat or patchouli leaf in Calcutta and Bombay markets respectively. These local names were exclusively applied to *P. heyneanus* in the western part of India¹⁶. Therefore, the name patchouli was used in the Indian markets even before the patchouli plant, *P. cablin*, was described and introduced into India. Further, this species has never been named as or called patchouli in the local languages in the Philippines, China and South East Asian regions. The name ‘patchouli’ appears to have phonetically evolved from ‘pacchilai’ in Tamil. Since this word [pacchi (pacchai) means green and ilai means leaf] has been used for centuries for *P. heyneanus*^{25,26}, the name patchouli must have been derived from Tamil^{2,10,15,22}. *The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (7th edn) also affirms that the word ‘patchouli’ is derived from the Tamil word ‘pacculi’, this vernacular name was also used for *P. vestitus* Benth²⁷. *P. heyneanus* is also called ‘kathir pacchai’ in Tamil^{28,29}. ‘Kathir’ here refers to the spiked nature of inflorescence that is similar to the inflorescence of cereals. Therefore, the name patchouli ought to have originated from the Tamil name ‘pacchilai’.

Popularization of patchouli

It has been reported that the patchouli herb was primarily used in India as

insect repellent to keep insects away from garments^{2,8–10}. However, the literature mentions that patchouli was introduced into India in 1834 (ref. 16). Further, no cultivation of patchouli plant was recorded in any part of India before its introduction in 1834. Initially, *P. heyneanus* was sold in Bombay market as patchouli or patchapat or pacha before the patchouli plant was introduced into India. It might be either *P. heyneanus* or any other indigenous shrubby *Pogostemon* species such as *P. benghalensis* (Burm.f.) Kuntze, *P. plectranthoides* Desf. and *P. pubescens* Benth., having leaf aroma similar to that of patchouli which could have been used as insect repellent in ancient India.

Though the patchouli herb had been used in China and India for many centuries, it became familiar in Europe in the 1840s through imported Indian shawls associated with the characteristic patchouli odour^{13,14}. Since *Pogostemon* species have insect-repellent properties due to the essential oil, the dried leaves or leaf powder of any shrubby *Pogostemon* species could have been used in packing these fabrics during export to keep-off insects. The French perfume manufacturers at last discovered the secret odour of the Indian shawls as due to the association of *Pogostemon* species. Later, they learned to perfume their homespun shawls and other articles with the imported patchouli leaves. There is evidence that indigenous shrubby *Pogostemon* species from India had also been taken to Europe around 1800. For example, the genus *Pogostemon* (including *P. plectranthoides* type species of the genus) was described by Desfontaines in 1815 based on the specimens collected from a plant grown in the hothouse of Jardin des plantes, Paris. This plant was believed to be sourced from southern India (D. Tirvengadam, pers. commun.). It is said that the dried patchouli leaves were first imported into London in 1844 from China via New York¹³. After the Europeans realized the importance of patchouli in 1840s, they started looking for its actual source (origin). At that time, small-scale cultivation of patchouli (*P. cablin*) was noticed in the Strait Settlements (British Malaya) and it was almost exclusively carried out by the Chinese immigrants from southern China for medicinal uses¹⁶. However, this plant is not indigenous to the Malaysian region^{30,31}. Hence, it is believed that this

plant could have been brought from southern China by the Chinese people to the Strait Settlements. Therefore, search for the patchouli plant could have led to the then British-controlled Strait Settlements. Later, large-scale cultivation of patchouli was started in the Strait Settlements and subsequently it was introduced into Java, Sumatra and other Indonesian islands from Penang¹⁰. The chief supply of patchouli leaf material to Europe was initially from the Strait Settlements¹⁴. The effort to introduce different varieties of patchouli plant for commercial cultivation in India was first attempted by the Tata Oil Mills in 1942. Later in 1962, systematic cultivation and research was initiated by the Central Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants at its Regional Centre in Bangalore⁴. Subsequently, patchouli has been cultivated in some parts of India. However, large quantities of patchouli oil are still being imported into India.

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