



SHEA BUTTER or Karite

Butyrospermum parkii Kotschy, Sapotaceae

Shea Butter is obtained from the nut of the Mangifolia tree in Central Africa. It's also called Karite Butter or African Shea Nut Butter. Shea Butter is high in triglycerides and has 5% fatty acids, 8% unsaponifiables and 7% waxy esters. The Mangifolia tree can live up to 300 years and has been called the "God Send" to the people of Africa. Found in the African Savannah, the Mangifolia tree gives up its fruit once a year. This is called the Karite Nut. This nut is then boiled and the oils is extracted from it and refined into Shea Butter. The Shea tree grows spontaneously in the wooded savannahs in West Africa (Ghana, Mali and Burkina Faso) on balanced and well-drained soils. The tree is stout, can grow up to 20m high and its trunk can reach 1 metre in diameter. It produces its first fruit when it is about 25 years old and reaches its full production at the age of 40 or 50. The fruit are berries the size of large plums of 3 to 6cm. The peri cap is edible and they contain 1 to 3 seeds surrounded by a thin brittle hull. Their two thick kernals contain about 50% of a fatty substance. One tree produces 15 to 20 kilos of fresh fruit, which corresponds to 3 to 4 kilos of kernels. It takes 4 kilos of kernels to make 1 kilo of shea butter.

Characteristics

Shea butter has the aspect of a cold butter, with a yellowish colour and a characteristic mushroom/nut odour. (After being industrially refined, the product loses this odour and colour almost completely.) Crude shea butter has natural antioxidant properties due to its content in tocopherols. The content in shea butter of unsaponifiable fats is remarkable in comparison with other oils. That means that even though it's a "fat" it won't turn into soap in the presence of a strong alkali so its moisturising properties remain viable. It's said that unsaponifiables help keep the skin young by stimulating the tissue and helping the skin make its own collagen. The product is therefore much appreciated in the cosmetic industry.

Traditional Use

The shea trees in the neighboring forest are protected by the tribe, who sometimes give a mystical aura to it. It is not surprising, since shea butter is such an important source of edible fat and an even more precious material for many skin care products. The shea tree also offers other useful things: the bark, the leaves, the latex, the roots, and the oil cakes are used by people for a number of purposes. The pulp of the berry can be eaten when still fresh. To make shea butter the fruit are spread on the ground to dry during a certain length of time, then the kernels are separated from the hulls and cold-pressed.

Shea butter is used for cooking but has also a wide range of other traditional uses:

- It is massaged on the body after washing to relax the muscles and soften the skin, especially during the dry season.



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- It is used to treat sprains, wounds and colds.
- It is also used as an after-shave and hair balm, as it fixes dry, brittle hair.
- In some areas, shea butter is applied on the umbilical cord of new born babies to facilitate its healing.

Industrial Use

Shea butter is mainly used in chocolate and in soaps, lotions and cosmetics.

The industrial extraction of shea butter is made using a solvent which is usually hexane. The yield obtained is much higher that way. Shea butter can be also extracted by pressure. In this case the yield is lower but this process keeps in the shea butter the whole range of its active principles.

Cosmetics Use

Shea butter has soothing, moisturising and protecting effects. Due to the presence of a sizeable quantity of unsaponifiable fats, its content in vitamins and other active elements, shea butter adds other more precise activities to these general properties.

- It displays a protecting role against UV rays because of its content in cinnamic acid and can thus be incorporated in solar products. The natural latex contained in shea butter would moreover prevent certain sun allergies.
- Shea butter has also an activity on cell regeneration and capillary circulation. This favours the healing of small wounds, skin cracks and crevices, and skin ulcers. In the cosmetic field, this property is an asset against skin ageing.
- It has restructuring effects on the epidermis, also on dry and fragile hair. Dry skin, dermatitis, dermatoses, eczema, sun burn and burns are all helped by natural shea butter.
- It has an anti-elastase characteristic, which makes it a good active ingredient against stretch marks.
- Shea butter can also be used to treat rheumatism and aching muscles and to ease colds because it decongests nasal mucous tissues.
- It is very well tolerated by the skin for it does not normally trigger any allergic reaction and can even be used on very sensitive skin areas such as mucous tissues and around the eyes.

Shea butter is therefore an outstanding product for the cosmetic and pharmaceutical purposes, even incorporated in high proportions. It is easy to work into all kinds of emulsions and makes a very good excipient as it prevents allergenic reactions without altering the active principles.

Toxicity

She butter is non toxic. In fact, it is used in foods (including fancy chocolates) to enhance texture and flavour.