

Citronella

FAQs

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[CBC News](#)

What is citronella?

Citronella is the common name for a perennial grass, *Cymbopogon nardus*, noted for its blue-green tinge and lemon-scented leaves. It can grow up to 1.5 metres and is cultivated in Sri Lanka, India, Burma and Indonesia. It is related to the lemon grass used in Southeast Asian cooking.

How does it end up in insect repellents?

When the grass is about three months old, the leaves are cut and then left to dry in the sun for a month. The grass is then steam-distilled to remove the essential oil. This is the yellow-brown oil with the strong lemon smell used for commercially-produced oils, soaps and other products. Oil of citronella has been in use for more than 50 years as a repellent against mosquitoes, biting flies and fleas. It's found in candles, lotions, gels, sprays, soaps and towelette wipes. It is also in some pellet products used for home lawns and gardens to repel animals.

Are there other uses for citronella?

The leaves are believed by some people to have medicinal value and have been used to treat rheumatism, colds, headaches, back pain, fevers, muscle aches, menstrual problems, digestive problems, fatigue and to increase mental sharpness.

Can it be dangerous to my health?

Pure citronella oil should not be directly put on the skin. It's been known to increase the heart rate of some people. It should be mixed and used only externally.

The Environmental Protection Agency in the U.S. says there is little or no toxicity in oil of citronella. The only concern is skin irritation. There have been no reports of adverse reactions in its use. Based on laboratory studies of animals, it does not pose any risk to them either.

However, Health Canada says it is concerned about large amounts of citronella products being applied to skin in the form of insect repellent. The agency completed a re-evaluation of citronella insect repellents in 2004 and found there was still "a high degree of uncertainty about its safety." Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency is proposing phasing out citronella-based repellent.

How effective is citronella?

DEET, or N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide, is acknowledged as the most effective mosquito repellent. DEET is the active ingredient in most insect repellent products. It doesn't kill bugs, but its vapours discourage them from landing or climbing on you.

- [The DEET Debate](#)

A 2002 study by the University of North Carolina and the University of Florida (published in the New England Journal of Medicine), found that products containing about 24 per cent DEET protected people for almost four hours. By contrast, products with citronella provided just 19 minutes of protection. The study said the most effective natural repellents contained eucalyptus oil, which provided almost two hours of protection from bugs.

What else can I do to keep bugs away?

Insects are attracted to standing water, change any birdbaths, kiddie pools at least once a week. A bit of bleach in the backyard pool can kill mosquito larvae.

- Clean your rain gutters periodically as well as flowerpots, pet dishes and garbage cans, which can all be breeding grounds for insects.
- Mosquitoes love shady areas, so keep the lawn cut short and trim trees and hedges.
- When sitting outdoors, pick a slightly breezy spot. Mosquitoes have a hard time moving in the wind.
- Wear light-coloured clothing; mosquitoes are attracted to dark colours.
- Start using unscented, or very light-scented soaps and shampoos, bugs are attracted to heavy scents.
- Limit your outdoor activities during the dawn or dusk when bugs generally feed.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/consumers/citronella.html>