

# Nantong—China's Peppermint Producing Center

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Peppermint is a plant indigenous to China and Europe. It is now also produced in other parts of the world, including the USA, India, Korea, Japan and Brazil. According to historical records, the Chinese first used peppermint in the Song Dynasty (960-1279), mainly as a medicine to treat acute febrile diseases and heat strokes.

Since the 1950s peppermint production in China has increased steadily with rising demand on the world market. Nantong Prefecture in Jiangsu Province at the mouth of the Yangtze River, which administers six counties, is one of China's and the world's largest peppermint producers. With a temperate climate and a fertile soil, Nantong also produces the best peppermint in the country. Large-scale production of the plant in the area started in 1931, when a factory in nearby Shanghai across the Yangtze needed large supplies.

Now Nantong supplies about 30% of China's peppermint oil and about 1/10 of the world's total. Some 10,000 hectares of land in the area are devoted to growing peppermint, according to Ding Yunzhu, deputy director of the Nantong Prefecture Planning Office. Each year the state buys all the peppermint oil produced in the area, about 1,700 tons, and exports 1,250 tons. The rest is processed and sold on the domestic market.

Other major producers are Nantong's neighboring prefectures, Yancheng and Huaiyin, and areas in Anhui, Jiangxi and Henan Provinces.

Two varieties of peppermint are grown in Nantong, one with purple stalks and purple veins, the other with green stalks and round leaves, according to Zhao Guofang, an agronomist of the Haimen Research Institute of Agricultural Sciences in Nantong. A new strain with higher yield and increased resistance to pests and lodging has been developed from the latter variety. Per hectare yield of peppermint oil from the new strain has reached 120 kilos, 40-50 kilos higher than the original variety, and its content of menthol is 1-1.5% higher than that extracted from the conventional varieties.

Peppermint is harvested twice, in other words, two cuttings a year in Nantong. Distilleries near the fields extract peppermint oil from leaves and stalks of peppermint plants. The first cutting is in July. The menthol content of peppermint oil from the first cutting is between 79-80%. The second cutting is in late October, the menthol content of peppermint oil from the second cutting is 82-84%. The amount and quality of oil distilled can differ a great deal,

depending on the experience of people handling the distillation process, according to Zhao Guofang. "The Chinese peppermint is of superior quality," said Zhao Guofang. "It belongs to the Asian type and has higher menthol content than the European variety," she said.

The Indians also grow the Chinese varieties, according to Zhao. But because of the high temperature in India, peppermint has a shorter growing period. As a result, its menthol content is only 70%, compared with 79% of the Nantong variety, she said.

Crude peppermint oil is purchased and sent by the Nantong branch of China Native Produce & Animal By-Products Import & Export Corporation to the Nantong Peppermint Processing Factory to be refined and processed.

The Nantong Peppermint Processing Factory has a capacity of 4,000 tons of peppermint oil a year, the largest in the world as well as in China. Last year the factory produced 1,000 tons of menthol crystals and 900 tons of peppermint oil. Because of a proliferation of small processing factories, the Nantong factory has operated under capacity in recent years.

"White Bear" menthol crystal produced by the Nantong factory is pure and has a high melting point of 42-44°C. The crystal won a national quality gold medal in 1979. The factory's peppermint oil is also rated a provincial quality product. Its peppermint oil and menthol crystals are exported to more than 50 countries, including the United States and Japan, through the Jiangsu branch of China National Native Produce & Animal By-Products and its agencies abroad, including Teck Soon Hong Ltd. in Hong Kong.

Peppermint products from China are meeting increased competition from India and South Korea because of cheaper prices of their exports, according to Zhao Guofang. To maintain Nantong's market share overseas, agricultural officials, researchers and processors in Nantong are making painstaking efforts to improve the quality of their peppermint products. The local research institute is developing new peppermint strains to fight against the plant's natural deterioration and further raise the plant's menthol content. Meanwhile, farmers are guided to improve methods of cultivation.

## Reference

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