

# Sustainability of Honeybush cultivation in South Africa



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ABioSA STUDENT RESEARCH

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Tafadzwa Makhuza did this research as part of her Master's degree in geography at Rhodes University. She presented her research at the first African Biotrade Festival in September 2023. Tafadzwa is now working towards her PhD in geography, summarising her findings for the Honeybush tea industry and writing scientific articles for publication.



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## About Honeybush

Honeybush (*Cyclopia* species) is an endemic fynbos shrub growing on sandy coastal plains, mountain slopes and valleys in the Cape Fold mountains across the Western and Eastern Cape provinces of South Africa.

Six of the 23 *Cyclopia* sub-species are wild harvested or cultivated to produce Honeybush tea and extracts. The plant material is finely chopped and placed in fermentation tanks for oxidation at high temperatures, allowing for the development of its unique flavour and rich reddish-brown colour.

The plant is dried, sieved, graded for quality and packaged. Production of green Honeybush skips the fermentation process to retain high levels of antioxidants, making it suitable for nutraceutical extracts.

Low in tannins and caffeine-free, Honeybush boasts a long history of therapeutic use. Research shows it may provide an alternative treatment for several conditions. It has anti-inflammatory effects, anti-cancer potential, and a positive effect on individuals living with Type 2 diabetes.

With further research and development, Honeybush has significant potential to be promoted as a niche indigenous product in tea markets and as an alternative health treatment.

### Availability and sustainability

Honeybush is mainly an export product, with 75% of the tea produced in South Africa being sold to Europe, Japan and the United States.

It is both cultivated and harvested in the wild, and in some areas is threatened by overharvesting and invasion by alien plants.

The sector is undergoing significant development to ensure reliable quality supply from sustainable harvesting of Honeybush for its use as a commercially viable nutraceutical extract.

## Research summary

Prior to 2023, most Honeybush production relied on wild populations, creating a growing need for cultivation to ease pressure on wild populations and ensure a consistent supply of high-quality cultivated products.

Makhuza investigated the environmental, social, and economic characteristics of cultivated Honeybush tea.

Her work aimed to help guide future investment in the sector and inform sustainable use strategies.

Her research focused on identifying the elements of a successful enterprise and community project value chain, looking at both reseeded and resprouting Honeybush.

Makhuza's research aimed to develop a sustainable resource use framework which considers environmental, economic and social aspects for future Honeybush cultivation.

## Research process

At the time of Makhuza's research, few farmers had established economically-viable Honeybush cultivation. Makhuza investigated the drivers of success through an inventory and analysis of the various models of cultivation.

Her investigation looked at the environmental, economic and social practices in successful enterprises. These were the three pillars of sustainability identified by the UEFT Framework.

Three of the six commercially used species are reseeders which germinate from seeds, while the other three are resprouters which regenerate from their underground storages. Each of the species have their own distribution range and are adapted to differing and overlapping climatic conditions.

The investigation focused on four species of Honeybush – *C. longifolia* (van Staden's tea), *C. subternata* (marsh tea), *C. intermedia* (mountain tea), and *C. genistoides* (coastal tea) on five successful Honeybush farms covering 172.2 hectares in the Western Cape.

Each farm cultivates one of the four species and a case study approach was used to investigate their sustainability. Semi-structured interviews with questions aligned with the UEFT framework were conducted to gather the qualitative data.

The quantitative data collected and analysed comprised mapping, plant dimension and yield measurements, soil samples, biodiversity surveys, and yield cost estimates.

Nine participants from community enterprises or who had left the industry were interviewed to identify challenges in the industry.

## Outcomes

Makhuza's research highlighted key environmental factors that should be considered when selecting species for cultivation to improve cost-effectiveness and success. She found that Honeybush could grow outside their natural distribution range if growing conditions were carefully simulated.

Her work supports a mixed-farming approach and encourages enterprise owners to access as much of the value chain as possible.

Challenges identified in the industry included limited marketing and capital, invasive alien plants, inexperience with Honeybush cultivation, high crop mortality rate, dissatisfaction with wet tea pricing from small-scale enterprises, and a preference for more profitable crops.

Makhuza's thesis was approved in May 2025. Since then, she has presented her findings to the SA Honeybush Tea Association and is set to share them at the Fynbos Forum in August 2025.