

# Royal recommendations oils the wheels of a growth industry

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The Duchess of Sussex might not know it, but on a gently rolling hill farm in northern NSW's lush hinterland, she has an unlikely fan in farmer Phil Prather.

The two share a love of tea tree oil; the royal newcomer as a committed user of natural, non-chemical skin creams and medicinal ointments, and Mr Prather as a grower of the Australian native tree and exporter of its extracted oil.

It is thanks to savvy young consumers like the duchess discovering the wonders of the age-old herbal remedy that the \$35 million Australian tea tree oil industry is booming and on track to double its size in the next decade.

Mr Prather and his wife, Dee-Ann, have so much confidence in the future of tea tree oil that two years ago they converted a 120ha dairy farm near Casino to an irrigated tea tree plantation with two million young trees.

With their first harvest of the feathery branches and oil-rich leaves early this month yielding 40,000kg of distilled tea tree oil, the Prathers are part of the transformation of the former cottage industry to a commercial farm sector that this year will produce more than one million kilograms of the essential oil.

Most oil is sold to cosmetic, medicinal and personal care manufacturers in Europe and the US, with Mr Prather attributing some of the recent boom in demand among young trendsetting women for tea tree oil products directly to Meghan Markle, who is this week visiting Australia with her husband, Prince Harry.

Last year, Meghan told fashion magazine *Allure* that the one product she never left home without when travelling was a small bottle of tea tree oil, extracted and distilled from crushed leaves of Australia's melaleuca alternifolia tree. "It's not the most glamorous thing, but if you get a cut, a mosquito bite, a small breakout, no matter what it is, it's my little cure-all," Meghan said.

The royal endorsement of the oil — which has been used as a traditional antiseptic, antifungal and anti-inflammatory medicine by Aborigines for thousands of years — was music to Mr Prather's ears.

It was a sign that the homespun Australian tea tree oil industry had come of age, overcoming tough times a decade ago when oversupply and oil adulteration were rife and farmgate oil prices fell to an unprofitable \$12/kg.

Now prices have risen to \$43/kg for pure tea tree oil, the 90 growers in the local industry are expanding, big corporate players are eyeing Australian production opportunities and more than 4000ha of northern NSW's coastal fringe is sown to permanent tea tree plantings.

“We've seen many of the multinationals come in because they have the faith in the buzzing naturals market,” Ms Prather said.