

ELLE

Elle Beauty SPOTLIGHT | ARGAN OIL

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For a young celeb, sudden stardom can lead to obsessive paparazzi attention and a stint in rehab. For natural ingredients, popularity can be just as dangerous. The success of palm oil led farmers to burn parts of the Indonesian and Malaysian rain forests to plant palm orchards; illegal trading of caviar caused a drop in the rare egg-producing sturgeon; and the overuse of sandalwood had depleted the sweet-smelling Indian tree. Fortunately, the latest botanical phenomenon, the antioxidant argan oil, not only rivals all other free-radical fighters to date, but its high demand will actually help the environment as well.

Pressed from the nut of the argan tree's fruit (a favorite snack of local goats), argan oil has protected the hair and skin of Morocco's Berber women for centuries. Recent research has proven the oil is packed with skin-beneficial compounds: hydrating essential fatty acids, potent antioxidant polyphenols, and nearly three times the amount of vitamin E in olive oil.

Liz Earle, creator of Liz Earle Naturally Active Skincare, discovered its moisturizing effects at a Moroccan hammam 10 years ago. "It was the best facial I'd ever received," she says. "I had to know more about the oil called the 'gold of Morocco.'" She brought a bottle to her London laboratory for analysis. The chemists, impressed by its antioxidant activity, formulated Superbalm, a healing skin treatment, around it.

"The antioxidants and fatty acids work synergistically to stop inflammation," says Pat Peterson, the executive director of research and development for Avada, which is launching a skin-care line, Green Science, based around the extract this month. According to the company's clinical tests, subjects showed a 38 percent improvement in lines after eight weeks of twice-daily use of the argan-rich firming face cream. Plus, scientists believe argan oil may also have anticancer properties. In a study in *Cancer Detection and Prevention*, the growth of three types of in vitro human prostate cancer cells were inhibited 48 hours after being treated with sterols and polyphenols extracted from argan oil.

The extract is proving to have serious girl power, too. In 2002, the Moroccan government helped established female cooperatives to manufacture argan oil. These programs prevent abuse of the forests' limited supply of trees and provide workers with a steady income and basic education classes. "Purchasing the oil from the women's cooperatives supports their social and economic welfare," says model Josie Maran, whose namesake beauty brand includes a pure argan oil moisturizer.

Although extracting the ingredient is labor-intensive (machines grind the kernels, but each nut needs to be cracked by hand), only a small amount of the oil is needed in a product to deliver results.

As far as some experts are concerned, argan oil is a win-win. "Unlike other exotic resources such as caviar and marine algae, it offers the best of both worlds," says Leslie Baumann, MD, the director of cosmetic-dermatology at the Miller School of Medicine at the University of Miami. "It's an antiager and it's eco-friendly."