AGRICULTURAL TECHNOLOGY PHYTOCHEMISTRY

Comprehensive Technical Analysis of Cymbopogon nardus: Botanical Morphology, Phytochemistry, and Industrial Applications of Citronella Grass

Published: August 21, 2026 | Index ID: #863

Technical Overview and Botanical Significance

The genus **Cymbopogon**, belonging to the **Poaceae** family, represents one of the most economically significant groups of aromatic grasses globally. Among these, **Cymbopogon nardus (L.) Rendle**, commonly known as **Serai Wangi** or **Citronella Grass**, stands out due to its high concentration of essential oils used in pharmaceutical, cosmetic, and agricultural industries. This perennial grass is native to tropical regions, particularly Southeast Asia, where Indonesia serves as a primary global producer. The complexity of its chemical profile and the robustness of its physiological structure necessitate a rigorous technical examination to optimize extraction yields and industrial utility.

Understanding the distinction between *Cymbopogon nardus* and its close relative, *Cymbopogon citratus* (Lemongrass), is critical for technical practitioners. While both share a similar outward appearance, their chemical compositions—specifically the ratio of **citronellal** to **citral**—dictate vastly different commercial applications. *Cymbopogon nardus* is primarily valued for its insecticidal and fragrance properties, whereas *C. citratus* is more common in culinary and flavoring contexts. This article provides an exhaustive analysis of the botanical architecture, phytochemical pathways, and industrial processing standards for *Cymbopogon nardus*.

Taxonomic Classification and Phylogenetic Framework

Accurate identification of *Cymbopogon nardus*is the cornerstone of any technical application. The taxonomic hierarchy, based on the APG IV system, provides a framework for understanding its genetic resilience and evolutionary adaptations. According to established literature (Nilan et al., 2019; Tora, 2013), the classification is as follows:

- Kingdom: Plantae
- Subkingdom: Tracheobionta (Vascular plants)
- Superdivision: Spermatophyta (Seed plants)
- Division: Magnoliophyta (Flowering plants)
- Class: Liliopsida (Monocotyledons)
- Subclass: Commelinidae
- Order: Poales
- Family: Poaceae (Gramineae)
- Genus: Cymbopogon
- Species: Cymbopogon nardus (L.) Rendle

The phylogeny of the Poaceae family allows *Cymbopogon*to thrive in diverse ecological niches, ranging from arid highlands to humid tropical lowlands. Its ability to sequester carbon and utilize C4 photosynthetic pathways makes it a highly efficient biomass producer, reaching heights of 1.0 to 1.5 meters under optimal conditions.

Morphological Characteristics and Physiological Adaptation

The Root System and Rhizomatic Structure

The root system of *Cymbopogon nardus* is characterized as a fibrous (adventitious) network. Unlike taproots, these roots emerge from a short, thick, and sturdy rhizome. Technical observations indicate that these roots can penetrate deep into the soil profile (up to 50-80 cm), providing not only structural stability against wind but also access to deep-seated nutrient reserves and moisture. This root architecture allows the plant to act as an effective tool for soil conservation and erosion control on sloped terrains.

Stems (Culms) and Tillering Mechanisms

The stems of Citronella grass grow in dense clumps or tufts. They are technically defined as **culms**, which are upright, cylindrical, and predominantly hollow between the nodes. The base of the stem is often reddish-purple or pale green, providing a diagnostic feature to distinguish it from other Cymbopogon species. The tillering mechanism is highly aggressive, allowing a single plant to form a large, multi-stemmed cluster within a single growing season.

Foliar Anatomy: The Site of Essential Oil Synthesis

The leaves of *Cymbopogon nardus* are the primary economic component. Morphologically, they are simple leaves (folium simplex) consisting of a sheath, a ligule, and a long, linear blade. The leaf blade can reach lengths of 100 cm and widths of 1.5 to 2.5 cm. From a technical standpoint, the **abaxial and adaxial surfaces** of the leaves contain specialized secretory structures known as glandular trichomes and oil cells, where the biogenesis of essential oils occurs. The leaves are characterized by their sharp, serrated margins and a prominent midrib, which provides the necessary rigidity to keep the long blades upright for maximum light interception.

Comparative Matrix: Cymbopogon nardus vs. Cymbopogon citratus

In industrial settings, misidentification leads to substantial economic loss. The following table provides a side-by-side technical comparison of the two primary commercial species.

Feature	Cymbopogon nardus (Serai Wangi)	Cymbopogon citratus (Serai Dapur)
Primary Usage	Industrial Oil, Repellent, Perfumery	Culinary, Food Flavoring, Tea
Leaf Coloration	Darker green, often reddish at base	Lighter green, whitish at base
Aroma Profile	Sharp, pungent, medicinal	Lemon-like, fresh, citrusy
Main Chemical	Citronellal (32-45%), Geraniol	Citral (70-80%), Myrcene
Height	1.0 - 1.5 Meters (Upright)	0.5 - 1.0 Meters (Often drooping)
Leaf Margin	Highly scabrous (rough/sharp)	Less scabrous

Phytochemical Analysis of Citronella Essential Oil

The value of *Cymbopogon nardus* is derived from its secondary metabolites, specifically the volatile organic compounds (VOCs) stored in the leaf tissue. The extraction of these compounds produces **Citronella Oil**. This oil is a complex mixture of monoterpenes and sesquiterpenes.

Key Chemical Constituents

1. Citronellal ($C_{10}H_{18}O$): An aldehyde that provides the characteristic sharp odor. It serves as a precursor for the synthesis of menthol and other fragrance chemicals.
2. Geraniol ($C_{10}H_{18}O$): A monoterpenoid alcohol with a rose-like scent. It is highly valued in the perfume industry for its fixative properties and pleasant aroma.
3. Citronellol ($C_{10}H_{20}O$): Another monoterpenoid alcohol, often used as an insect repellent and in floral perfumes.
4. Limonene and Camphene: Minor constituents that contribute to the overall volatility and antimicrobial properties of the oil.

Theoretical Yield Models

The yield of essential oil (Y) from *Cymbopogon nardus*is typically calculated as a percentage of the dry or fresh leaf mass. Under standard steam distillation, the yield ranges from 0.5% to 1.2%. The technical formula for calculating yield is:

Yield (%) = (Mass of Extracted Oil / Mass of Initial Raw Material) × 100

Factors influencing this yield include the age of the leaf (optimal harvest at 6-8 months), the moisture content (partial drying or wilting for 24-48 hours is recommended to break cell walls), and the distillation parameters (pressure and temperature).

Technical Workflow: Industrial Distillation and Processing

To produce high-grade Citronella oil that meets international standards (such as ISO or SNI), a precise engineering workflow must be followed. The most common method is **Steam Distillation**.

Step 1: Raw Material Preparation

Leaves should be harvested during the early morning to minimize the evaporation of volatile compounds due to solar radiation. The leaves are then subjected to **wilting**(natural air drying in the shade). Wilting reduces the water content from approximately 80% to 50%, which prevents enzymatic degradation and reduces the energy required for steam generation.

Step 2: Steam Distillation Mechanics

The prepared leaves are packed into a distillation retort. Steam is injected from the bottom, passing through the plant material. The heat causes the essential oil glands to rupture, releasing the volatiles into the steam. The vapor mixture (steam + oil) travels to a condenser.

Step 3: Condensation and Separation

In the condenser, the vapor is cooled using a heat exchanger (typically water-cooled). The resulting liquid flows into a **florentine flask**or separator. Since Citronella oil is less dense than water (specific gravity approx. 0.880 to 0.900) and hydrophobic, it forms a distinct layer on top of the water, allowing for easy mechanical separation.

Step 4: Filtration and Dehydration

The collected oil often contains trace amounts of water and particulate matter. It is subjected to filtration and the addition of anhydrous sodium sulfate (Na2SO4) to remove residual moisture, ensuring a clear, stable final product with a long shelf life.

Industrial Applications and Economic Value

1. Agricultural and Pest Management

Citronella oil is a globally recognized biopesticide. Its primary mechanism involves masking scents that attract insects, particularly mosquitoes (Aedes aegypti). Unlike synthetic repellents like DEET, Citronella oil is non-toxic to humans and biodegradable, making it a staple in "green" consumer products.

2. Pharmaceutical and Therapeutic Uses

Research indicates that *Cymbopogon nardus*extracts possess significant antifungal, antibacterial, and anti-inflammatory properties. It is used in topical ointments to treat fungal infections and in aromatherapy to reduce stress and anxiety by modulating the central nervous system through olfactory stimulation.

3. Cosmetic and Fragrance Industry

Due to its high geraniol and citronellal content, the oil is a primary feedstock for the synthesis of more expensive fragrances. It is used in soaps, detergents, and lotions to provide a fresh, clean scent while also acting as a natural preservative.

Case Study: Optimizing Oil Yield in Tropical Regions

A technical study conducted in Indonesia analyzed the impact of harvesting frequency on oil quality. The study categorized three plots with varying harvest intervals (3 months, 6 months, and 9 months). Results indicated that a **6-month interval**provided the highest concentration of geraniol (above 15%) and the most favorable biomass-to-oil ratio.

Troubleshooting Common Operational Challenges

- Issue: Low Oil Yield. Solution: Check the leaf wilting process. Over-drying leads to the loss of top-note volatiles, while under-drying leads to inefficient steam penetration.
- Issue: Dark/Discolored Oil. Solution: This often indicates oxidation or contamination from the distillation vessel. Ensure the use of stainless steel (Grade 304 or 316) and avoid copper or iron retorts.
- Issue: Low Citronellal Content. Solution: Soil analysis is required. Citronella grass requires high nitrogen and

potassium levels for terpene synthesis. Adjust fertilization protocols to include NPK 15-15-15.

Environmental and Sustainability Implications

Cymbopogon nardus is a sustainable crop because it requires minimal chemical inputs compared to other industrial crops. Its deep root system prevents soil erosion and assists in carbon sequestration. Furthermore, the **spent biomass**(the leaves left after distillation) can be recycled as organic mulch, livestock fodder, or as a substrate for bio-pellets and renewable energy generation. This circular economy model enhances the overall sustainability of Citronella farming.

The cultivation of Serai Wangi also provides a socio-economic lifeline for smallholder farmers in developing nations. By integrating basic distillation technology at the village level, farmers can move up the value chain from selling raw biomass to selling high-value essential oil. This transition requires technical training in distillation precision and quality control to ensure that the oil meets the stringent requirements of the global export market.

As global demand for natural and botanical ingredients continues to rise, the technical refinement of *Cymbopogon nardus*cultivation and processing remains a vital area of research. Future developments in genetic selection for higher oil content and the automation of distillation processes will likely further solidify the role of Citronella grass as a cornerstone of the bio-based economy. The synergy between botanical science and industrial engineering ensures that this ancient grass remains relevant in a modern, sustainable industrial landscape.

Tags: #Cymbopogon nardus #Essential Oil Distillation #Botanical Morphology #Citronella Oil #Phytochemistry