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The Best Herbal Remedies You've Never Heard Of

Learn about the potential medicinal benefits of five largely unknown plants that are attracting the attention of researchers.

MOST OF US INTERESTED IN CREATING A MORE SELF-RELIANT LIFE take the time to educate ourselves about how to promote our health naturally. So we may already know that ginger soothes nausea or recall that peppermint can reduce tension headaches. We may tuck a lavender bud under our pillow every night to help us relax, and stock our medicine cabinets with skin-healing calendula cream. But is that it? Do we know everything there is to know about herbal medicine?

Not even close. Hundreds of herbs, many of which we've never even heard of, are being studied every day as researchers examine the plants' abilities to heal our bodies. Nature offers us effective mood boosters, stress reducers, anti-inflammatories, skin healers and more—powerful medicines come from the plant world around us. We may never be able to catalog all the beneficial plants growing around the world, but research suggests these five unusual herbs from across the globe may be among our most powerful medicinal allies: Be one of the first to learn about their potential benefits. As research on these medicinal herbs is thus far minimal or ongoing, be sure to discuss taking any of these with your health-care provider before incorporating them into your health regimen.



PHOTO BY CHRIS KILHAM

SCOLETIUM

This succulent herb from South Africa was once used as a bartering currency, according to written records that date back to the 1600s. Since then it has made its way to North America and has been embraced for its reported antidepressant properties, including its ability to help elevate mood and promote relaxation and a sense of well being.

Scelletium contains alkaloids that interact with receptors in the brain, affecting the release of dopamine (a compound that affects pleasure) and serotonin (a compound that affects mood). "After you take it, you will feel its effects in about half an hour, and it feels great," says Chris Kilham, a researcher and author also known as the "Medicine Hunter." The herb produces an increased sense of clarity and an enhanced capacity for ideas and mental focus, he says. Scelletium may also be useful in decreasing anxiety, stress and tension.

The alkaloids in scelletium act much like the pharmaceutical antidepressants known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), according to a study reported in the *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*. However, scelletium does not appear to cause the same side effects as pharmaceuticals, which can



Chris Kilham with Palo Santo. Photo by Jeff Skeirik

include gastrointestinal disorders, loss of sex drive and insomnia. Some have reported mild headaches using scelletium. “Scelletium hasn’t quite caught on yet, but I’m confident it will,” Kilham says.

HOW TO USE: While this plant was traditionally fermented and chewed, you can use it more easily in capsule or tablet form. Use caution: Not much is known about this herb and its side effects, as it is still being researched.



PHOTO BY CHRIS KILHAM

SCHISANDRA BERRIES

Harvested from a deciduous climbing vine native to northern China and parts of Russia, the schisandra berry is more than just another trendy berry you could add to morning smoothies—schisandra may have abundant healing properties.

Schisandra’s woody vines produce bright red berries that hang in grapelike bunches. Although it is not well-known in the West, in Traditional Chinese Medicine schisandra is considered a fundamental herb and a harmonizing tonic—it has been used for centuries to treat liver, lung, kidney and heart disease. Herbalists primarily recognize it as an adaptogen, meaning it helps increase resistance to the damaging effects of disease and stress. It is used to increase energy, endurance, stamina and sex drive; normalize blood sugar and blood pressure; treat liver disease; enhance aspects of cognitive function; and improve longevity. “Schisandra is one of the greatest herbs in the world,” Kilham says. “It’s easy to cultivate, abundant, cheap and extensively studied.”

HOW TO USE: Flavorful schisandra can be eaten dried, ground into a powder or cooked. Its common Chinese name *wu wei zi* means “five-flavored berry,” as this spectacular berry is sweet, sour, salty, bitter and pungent. You can also take it as a tincture or drink it as a tea (brew 2 teaspoons of the dried fruit in 1 cup water for 10 minutes). Avoid taking schisandra while pregnant or nursing, if you have gastroesophageal reflux disease, peptic ulcers, epilepsy or high brain (intracranial) pressure. Also avoid it if you’re taking warfarin or drugs that are changed and broken down by the liver.



PHOTO BY TOMAS ČEKANAVIČIUS

CHAGA

Relatively unknown in the West, chaga is one of the strangest-looking fungi you will ever see. Hard, woody and found on birch and other trees, it looks like a hardened, crusty formation of burned charcoal. Despite its unseemly appearance, it possesses profound healing properties.

Found throughout northern parts of Europe, Asia and North America, chaga draws nutrients from the tree on which it grows. It is rich in antioxidant phenols, and in studies with mice has exhibited anti-inflammatory and immune-boosting effects. One of the most surprising benefits of chaga is the relief of psoriasis, a disease notoriously difficult to treat. In a 1973 Russian study, chaga was given to 50 people suffering from psoriasis and everyone saw improvement. “Nothing really works for psoriasis,” Kilham says. “But everyone in this study had their psoriasis resolved.

There’s never been an effect like that for psoriasis.” Chaga extract may also have anti-cancer effects, according to some laboratory studies. One 2008 study observed that chaga extract inhibited liver cancer cell growth, suggesting that this fungus may provide a new therapeutic option for treating liver cancer.

HOW TO USE: Although chaga is an edible fungus, it tastes bitter and is not enjoyable to eat. Try drinking it as a tea or taking it in supplement or powdered form. Little is known about the safety of using chaga supplements or tea, and there is some concern about taking chaga in combination with blood-thinning drugs or diabetes medications.



PHOTO BY CHRIS KILHAM

TAMANU OIL

You may be familiar with tamanu oil as a popular ingredient in a variety of topical beauty products, but did you know that it’s more than just a cosmetic treat for your skin? Tamanu oil may also help promote the formation of new skin tissue.

Extracted from the tamanu nut, exotic tamanu oil has long been treasured in the tropical islands of the South Pacific. While research on the health effects of tamanu oil is fairly limited, some evidence suggests that it contains compounds rich in fatty acids and vitamin E, and may offer anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, antibacterial and antimicrobial properties. Some proponents also claim tamanu oil can help skin regenerate, making it a wonderful aid in speeding the wound-healing process. Use it to reduce the appearance

of stretch marks and scars, and to heal burns, bites, stings, sores, scrapes, acne and blisters. “Tamanu oil is an indispensable skin herb,” Kilham says. “In addition to using it on my own skin, I’ve used it on a couple hundred people. It’s one of the greatest healing agents of all time.” Tamanu oil may also relieve pains caused by skin-related diseases such as eczema and psoriasis.

HOW TO USE: Use lotions, serums, moisturizers, creams and facial oils that list tamanu oil as an ingredient, or buy 100 percent tamanu oil at health-food stores. (They also sell diluted versions.) Gently massage it into the affected skin for a minute or two. As safety information is limited, avoid using tamanu oil if you’re pregnant or nursing.



PHOTO BY STEVEN FOSTER

BLACK COHOSH

Easy to identify thanks to its tall stalks and soft clusters of pearl-shaped buds and white flowers, black cohosh

is a beautiful wildflower named for its black, gnarled root. Native to North America, it can be cultivated as an ornamental but has become better known for relieving symptoms associated with women’s health.

For more than 40 years, black cohosh root has been widely prescribed in Europe (and is approved in Germany) for premenstrual cramps, premenstrual discomfort, painful menstruation and menopausal symptoms. Herbal practitioners often recommend it for hot flashes, night sweats, irritability, mood swings and anxiety. It may also be an effective alternative for women who cannot (or prefer not to) take hormone replacement therapy. The naturally occurring compounds in this herb exhibit a broad range of activities, one of which may include estrogenic activity (although evidence is contradictory).

HOW TO USE: Take this herb in capsule, tincture or extract form. You can also drink it as a tea (brew 2 teaspoons chopped black cohosh root in 2 cups water for 10 minutes). Until further studies are conducted, some doctors only recommend short-term use of this herb, as well as avoiding the herb if you have a liver disorder or discontinuing use if you develop symptoms of liver trouble (e.g., jaundice, dark urine, abdominal pain).

—GINA DEBACKER

RESOURCES

African Red Tea Imports
africanredtea.com
sceletium capsules and powder

Aura Cacia
auracacia.com
organic tamanu oil

Gaia Herbs
gaiaherbs.com
Joint Health capsules with chaga, black cohosh capsules and tincture

Herb Pharm
herb-pharm.com
black cohosh tincture, schisandra tincture

Mountain Rose Herbs
mountainroseherbs.com
tamanu oil

North American Herb & Spice
northamericanherbandspice.com
Chag-o-Charge Tea, Chag-o-Power Drops, ChagaMax capsules

NOW Foods
nowfoods.com
black cohosh capsules, schisandra capsules

Rainbow Light Nutritional Systems
rainbowligh.com
Black Cohosh Meno-Relief