

HEALTH

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TCM: Herbal harmony

Agastache (*Huo Xiang*) is a herb native to China and has long been used in traditional Chinese herbal remedies. It is widely distributed all over the country. There are two types of agastache. Agastache rugosa grows in China and is mainly found in Sichuan and Jiangsu Provinces. Pogostemon cablin originated from Southeast Asia and was imported to China hundreds of years ago. Nowadays, it also grows in Guangdong and Guangxi provinces. Pogostemon cablin is believed to be more potent than Agastache rugosa.

In TCM, agastache is acrid and slightly warm in nature and acts on the spleen, stomach and lung meridians.

Its special aromatic character makes it an excellent herb to dispel dampness from both the interior and exterior regions. It is useful as an ingredient for treatments in summer, when hot and humid weather can lead to heat stroke, skin rashes, diarrhoea and infectious diseases.

The herb is effective in harmonising the digestive system and relieving gastrointestinal problems such as intestinal flu, acute gastroenteritis and indigestion - again in summer.

It is usually prescribed with atractylodes rhizome, magnolia bark and pinellia tuber. When general signs like chills and aching occur, perilla leaf is also added.

Agastache acts on the lungs to fight off exogenous pathogens from outside the body, as in those causing acute febrile diseases. Baical skullcap root and wormwood are usually used with it in such cases. It is a major ingredient in a formula that can effectively prevent respiratory illness and enhance the immune function.

Agastache can help in other conditions. For example, topical use of agastache has a significant effect in fungal infections, making it ideal for treating heat rash and athlete's foot. Sinusitis, which is an inflammation of the nasal sinuses, is often difficult to treat when it becomes chronic. TCM practitioners believe that some stubborn cases may be due to the fire pathogens which irritate the nose and will use a remedy consisting of agastache and pig bile juice (in pill form).

Beside its medicinal use, agastache is also used as an ingredient in herbal drinks and some simple dishes in food therapy. For example, rice congee with agastache is good for treating indigestion and loss of appetite. A herbal drink can be made by adding ginger, red dates and agastache together in water and boiling for 20 minutes. Sugar is then added. This can strengthen the spleen and stomach and relieve vomiting.

Scientific research has backed up traditional uses of agastache. In 2004, a South Korean study showed that essential oil of agastache is effective in treating fungal infections. Another study published in 2006 showed that leaf extract from agastache may be beneficial for the treatment of oxidant-induced cell injury.

As it is often used exclusively in Chinese medicine, there is no study of its interaction with western drugs. No side effects have been reported from the use of agastache.

Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton are with Integrated Chinese Medicine Holdings (icm.com.hk). Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner.