

HEALTH

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TCM: Fruit for thought

Guilin is known not only for its magnificent mountains and stunning scenery, but also for a traditional medicinal fruit called *momordica* or *arhat*. Native to this picturesque city, the fruit is sold as a herbal product in more than 20 countries around the world. Yongfu county, southwest of Guilin in Guangxi province, is the major producer of this medicinal fruit.

Arhat fruit is harvested in autumn, when it becomes round and turns dark green. The fruit is usually dried slowly before being sold in Chinese herbalists. It's known as the "longevity fruit" because of its purported health properties.

The fruit has long been used to treat various respiratory ailments such as sore throats or chronic dry coughs, as it has cooling properties and enters the lung and spleen meridians, helping to moisten the lungs, lubricate the intestines and relieve summer heat.

Traditionally, it's more likely to be used as a functional health food rather than a drug. A simple home remedy is made by boiling it and serving as a cooling tea. The fruit is also boiled as a soup with pork ribs and apricot kernels, which is purported to soften

stools and dissolve enlarged lymph nodes in children's necks. According to traditional Chinese medicine, this is a sign of fire in the liver and heart systems.

Another well-known soup is made with pig lungs, watercress, apricot kernels, *arhat* fruit and tangerine peel. It benefits those who have lung heat that presents with a sore throat, hoarseness, thirst and irritability. According to TCM, these conditions are usually due to inadequate sleep, excessive smoking

and alcohol intake. The throat problems may also occasionally occur in autumn due to low humidity.

In clinical applications, physicians prefer to use it in combination with other herbs to enhance the efficacy.

Diabetic symptoms such as excessive thirst, profuse urine, a large appetite and constipation (associated with over-heating of the lung and stomach) call for the fruit to be used in combination with cochinchinense asparagus root and dwarf lily-turf tuber. Due to its sweetness, it's also a perfect bitter taste of some prescriptions.

Many recent scientific studies show that the *arhat* fruit has other positive effects on health. For example, it contains large amounts of vitamin C which can act as an antioxidant. It's also rich in mogrosides, a group of sweet compounds that cannot be absorbed by the intestine, and it is 200 times sweeter than cane sugar. Thus, the extract is a potential sugar substitute for diabetics.

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Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton

Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner