

HEALTH

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TCM: mother's best

If you can read Chinese, you will discover that the names of many herbs give an indication of their possible benefits. Motherwort in Chinese is known as *yi mu cao* which means "good for mother".

Motherwort (below) is from the mint family. Its leaves, stems and seeds are all used by Chinese medicine physicians. According to TCM theory, motherwort can activate blood circulation, dispel blood stasis, promote urination, reduce swelling and clear toxic heat.

Motherwort is one of the most popular herbs for menstrual or uterine disorders, especially those caused by blood stagnation. It is an essential ingredient in treating irregular periods and menstrual cramps and is usually combined with angelica root and white peony root. In cases of missed periods, it can be used with peach kernel and Sichuan lovage to promote the shedding of the uterine lining. In postpartum women, motherwort helps to maintain normal uterine contractions, promote expelling of the lochia (the liquid discharge from the uterus after childbirth) and ease pain as well as arrest bleeding, when combined with nut grass and angelica root. Some TCM physicians say the herb is good for postpartum abdominal pain and lochia expelling even when used on its own.

When used with couch grass rhizome and plantain seed, motherwort promotes urination and relieves swelling. It has shown good clinical outcomes for oedema and blood urine in acute nephritis. It is usually used for skin sores and abscesses for its effect of clearing toxic heat, when combined with dandelion, honeysuckle flower and forsythia capsule. A well-known remedy for itchy conditions is a motherwort decoction used as a bath in combination with glabrous greenbrier rhizome (*tu fu ling*) and duckweed. Motherwort is also given for neurosis

and palpitations, and is used to improve eyesight and as a general tonic.

Recent scientific research has shown that motherwort can stimulate contraction of the uterus in different animal experiments and is therefore contraindicated during pregnancy. Some studies also suggest that motherwort effects the cardiovascular system, blood clotting, respiration and renal function. Due to motherwort's effects on the blood, get medical advice before taking the herb if you are taking anticoagulant drugs.

In Chinese history, the famous Tai Ping ("too smooth") princess of the Tang dynasty retained beautiful and soft skin even after middle age. Her secret was motherwort. She used the herb in her bath for many years. Motherwort can be found in many ancient beauty remedies.

There is touching traditional story about motherwort. A mother had been ill with abdominal pain and irregular menstruation after childbirth. Her 10-year-old son worried that she had been suffering for so long, he tried to persuade her to see a doctor. But the mother refused, saying that they could not afford it. The boy went to see a herbalist who gave him a herb to prepare as a decoction for his mother. This helped, but the cost of more herbs was much too high. So the boy secretly followed the herbalist as he climbed a mountain at midnight to dig up the herb. After the herbalist had gone, the boy stayed and dug up more of the herb which he brought back to his mother. The boy kept digging up the herb and giving it to his mother. His mother, finally, was cured. The boy then named the herb *yi mu cao*.

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