

HEALTH

Edited by Suzanne Harrison suzanne.harrison@scmp.com

TCM

Rose Tse and
Angela Collingwood
info@shen-nong.com

Beat the heat

Herbal beverages have been popular in southern China for more than 200 years. They're believed to be ideal for people living in subtropical regions to prevent exogenous heat and dampness evils invading the body.

According to traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) theory, when people contract heat-damp evils, they may suffer from fever, thirst, excessive secretions, limb heaviness and nausea. The term "hot *chi*" is commonly used to describe these symptoms.

Drinking a herbal beverage is one popular remedy for treating hot *chi*. Herbs contained in the cooling herbal teas are said to be useful for clearing heat, cooling the blood, and restoring the smooth flow of *chi*.

They are dark brown, have a bitter flavour and have ingredients with "cold" properties. One easily found in grocery stores is the self-heal fruit-spike.

This is made primarily from the prunella spike herb (an ingredient used to clear liver fire mostly brought on by busy urban life), and also contains fructus momordicae, liquorice and pagoda tree flower. A local custom is to drink the tea if suffering from

dry lips, hoarseness, bloodshot eyes, excessive eye secretions, irritability, constipation, headache and aching bones.

Self-heal fruit-spike is called *xia hu cao* meaning "summer withering grasses". It has an ancient story to illustrate the origin of its name.

A mayor's mother suffered from scrofula (glandular swelling) of the neck. Doctors said there was no cure, but then a visiting herbalist told the mayor he knew of something that might work.

The herbalist climbed a hill to pick a herb and brought it to the mayor for decoction. It cured his mother, but the herbalist warned the mayor that this particular herb only grew in summer.

In the winter of the following year, the governor suffered from the same illness as the mayor's mother. Eager to help, the mayor told the governor about the herb capable of treating his illness. The mayor then climbed up the hill to pick the herb, but was unable to find any of the special plants.

When the herbalist returned in the summer, the mayor accused him of giving the wrong advice.

The herbalist gave the herb the name "see-me-not-after-summer" to remind the mayor that it would only grow in summer.

Despite its popularity, there are no conclusive studies evaluating the benefit of self-heal fruit-spike on humans. But in one animal model study, triterpenes extracted from self-heal fruit-spike were reported to have anti-allergic and anti-inflammatory effects.

If you have a busy lifestyle and symptoms of hot *chi*, a nourishing soup of self-heal fruit-spike with pig shank is a common remedy for clearing liver fire.

Rinse and drain 30g of self-heal fruit-spike. Scald 500g pig shank in boiling water and set aside. Pour two litres of water into another pot and bring to boil. Add all the ingredients to the pot and bring to the boil again. Finally, turn heat to low and simmer for about 45 minutes. Add a pinch of salt for seasoning.

Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner.