

HEALTH

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## TCM: Schisandra

In general, Chinese herbs are classified as having one of five “flavours” – pungent, sweet, sour, bitter and salty. These classifications are important in Chinese medicine because different flavours have their own effects on the internal organs and perform specific functions in the body.

Schisandra, or *wu wei zi* – literally a five-flavour berry – is an exception to other herbs which usually have just one or two flavours. It is regarded as a versatile herb in TCM as it possesses all of the flavours but has a dominant sour taste and therefore is able to act on the lung, kidney and heart meridians. It is prized for its use as an astringent, tonic and tranquiliser.

This herb is the dried ripe fruit of the flowering plant *schisandra chinensis* or

*schisandra sphenanthera* of the magnoliaceae family, which are found in abundance in the northern and central provinces of Liaoning and Hubei.

Clinically, schisandra is mainly used as an astringent agent, to arrest abnormal discharge or leakage of fluids and substances from the body, such as sweat, sputum, blood, urine, stool, sperm and vaginal discharges. In TCM, these conditions may indicate a profound deficiency or weakness inside the body that leads to excessive draining of the body’s fundamental substances and substantially affects health.

Schisandra is usually added to remedies for chronic coughs, asthma, sweat problems, diabetes, seminal emission, diarrhoea and incontinence. For example, when summer heat causes

fatigue, thirst, breath shortness and excessive sweating, a prescription with ginseng (9g), dwarf lily-turf tuber (12g) and schisandra (6g) will be used.

The herb can also be used ground together with wolfberry in equal amounts and served in tea.

Because of its multiple flavours, schisandra can act as a tonic especially for the heart and kidney systems. For this purpose a higher dose of the herb is used instead of the usual 3g to 6g.

It is usually combined with herbs such as sour jujube seed and Chinese arborvitae kernel for an uneasy “spirit” suffering from palpitations, insomnia, poor concentration and memory. It has been reported that fatigue occurring after sports competitions can be relieved by schisandra (150g) plus ginseng rootlet

(10g). According to TCM experience, however, schisandra is not suitable to use alone and should be used in combination with other herbs for better efficacy.

The quality can be easily identified by its colour and lustre. Herbs of high quality usually have a purplish-red, shiny shell. The herb’s origins is another important factor in determining the quality. Schisandra from the northeastern provinces are regarded as the best. They are commonly known as the “Northern five-flavour berry” or “Liaoning’s five-flavour” herb.

Modern experiments have found some of the constituents in schisandra to have a strong antioxidant effect and liver protection property. They are associated with a remarkable liver protection effect

against various types of drugs or chemical-induced toxicity. Constituents of schisandra such as lignans are now widely used to treat liver diseases. Two recent human trials conducted on the mainland demonstrated that schisandra might help people suffering from chronic viral hepatitis.

Schisandra’s liver protection function is attributed to its alteration of the liver cell’s membrane permeability to prevent the entry of toxic substances, increase blood flow to the liver and enhance regeneration of liver cells.

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