

Ten Little Known Ayurvedic Herbal Gems

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Ayurveda is a huge collection of interrelated practices that oversee literally every aspect of a person's health and lifestyle. Ayurveda places particular emphasis on the science of longevity, of course focusing on promoting good health throughout that lengthened life. Ancient Ayurvedic adherents observed and experimented with how people could best live to be as happy and healthy as possible. Over many generations of patient, careful observation and systematic exploration, they recorded in encyclopedic writings what they found worked and did not work about every aspect of living. These folks took the opportunity to closely observe people over very long periods of time—in extended families over generations, for example. Ayurveda teaches that in Vedic times, Ayurvedic physicians were sages and physicians, deeply devoted holy people, who saw health as an integral part of spiritual life.

In Ayurveda, mind, body and spirit are inextricably entwined, so Ayurveda looks to create a balance between body, mind, emotion, spirit and environment, and places emphasis on the ability of the human body to heal itself, with the assistance and support of a variety of nontoxic therapies, including medicinal foods, dietary programs and herbal remedies.

Along the line of herbal medicines, each plant remedy has possible benefits for the body, mind and spirit, and even the names often reflect the metaphysical slant for any given plant. Ayurveda has been practiced for so long that there are a dazzling array of useful remedies, and so many possibilities that we often overlook some real gems. Just for a moment, let's take the road less traveled and immerse ourselves in some jewels we usually find at the bottom of the treasure chest.

Ashoka bark (*Saraca asoca*), a bitter, cooling remedy, is a great example. At its simplest, it is a generic astringent herb that prevents fluids from leaking out of the body. Think postnasal drip. It is the go-to for PMS. Going beyond the usual, though, we find an outstanding remedy that tones the uterus, regulates menstruation, and enhances healthy endometrial tissue. It's the Swiss Army knife of herbs for female reproduction, finding a way to help menstrual cramps and period bleeding. Add to that its uses in wound washing, and even the flowers make a tasty chutney. The name translates as "no sorrow", a nod to its mood-lightening character.

Anantamul (*Hemidesmus indicus*) root is a bitter, cool, tridoshic remedy that lowers pitta. This versatile root is a star detoxifier for the urinary tract and skin. Famous as a blood cleanser, it removes excess pitta from the body and mind. Its anti-inflammatory nature lends it to cooling the stomach, suppressing diarrhea and pumping up appetite. Add to the list blood sugar balance, improving semen and controlling menstrual bleeding, and it looks pretty impressive. Try mixing anantamul with nutmeg and aloe in a fine paste, and applying it to pimples. Many people add this tasty herb to milk when consuming.

Bala (*Sida cordifolia*) is probably the most widely used rasayana tonic herb, after ashwaganda. The tridosha nature is rare in the herb world, so bala is widely applicable and, for that reason, quite worth noting. It is particularly tonic to vata. This is a sweet, cold, heavy herb that builds immune function. It is well tolerated in most patients. Bala contains five of the six tastes, a very rare property, so it is widely nourishing to all the body tissues.

Bala is soothing and mucilaginous, so it is particularly used for vata nerve disorders, and it is combined with other tonics for specific organs, such as with arjuna for the heart. This herb increases libido, and has a Vrishya effect, enhancing the quality and quantity of reproductive fluids (shukra dhatu) for healthy conception.

Bala is anti-inflammatory, and generally benefits the lungs. It contains a mild ephedrine-like compound, so it is a little energizing when administered. Consider using bala prepared as a milk decoction, along with ashwaganda and kapi kachu.

The Boswellia (*Boswellia serrata*, Salai guggul) tree is a close relative of frankincense, myrrh and the famous guggul. A sticky gum resin exudes from the bark of this large branching tree that grows in semi-arid areas of South Asia, and it is this dried gum that is used in natural healing. Boswellia shares healing properties with all these close cousins, so is known to lower inflammation, balance cholesterol, reduce pain, kill microbes, tighten tissue and strongly and deeply detoxify the body's tissues. Boswellia gum, in particular, has become well known in North America over the last decade for its pronounced effects on joint disorders, the traditional Ayurvedic use.

This gum contains constituents, boswellic acids, which inhibit inflammation producing substances, leukotrienes, in the body. In fact, boswellia gum inhibits inflammation through several mechanisms. Scientific experiments showed that the herb was found to exhibit marked sedative and analgesic effects. Boswellia has also been shown to reduce inflammatory processes in the digestive tract.

Kalmegh leaf and root (*Andrographis paniculata*) is a very widely used medicine in Ayurveda, but is just now getting attention here in the U.S. It is a wild annual shrub from the plains of Asia that also is cultivated in the gardens of North India. It's been a household remedy in Asia for many centuries. In Ayurveda, it is used for upper respiratory health during seasonal stress. Its karma (action) is Kaphapitta shamaka (it reduces vitiated kapha and pitta dosha). Andrographis is one of the coldest, bitterest herbs in the Ayurvedic pharmacopeia, it is a stand-in for all such actions, such as digestion, bile function and reducing nausea.

Kutaja bark (*Holarrhena antidysenterica*) is an effective remedy for the kind of tummy stress that travelers experience, and the accompanying diarrhea. Kutaja is astringent, so it will treat diarrhea and hemorrhoids, as well as having even more immune actions in the gut.

Musta root (*Cyperus rotundus*) is a common perennial weed with medicinal underground tubers. Commonly called nutgrass, it is used across a wide swath of the globe, from southern Europe, across the Arabian Peninsula to China. Today, it grows all over India. The tubers are primarily anti-inflammatory and diuretic. Musta mainly treats prameha (urinary disorders), mainly Apana Vata vitiated varieties.

With an astringent quality, musta is called for in skin irritations and sores. Since it moderates blood pressure, it is found in cardiovascular formulas. Musta is a general tonic for women's issues, and is rich in minerals. It appears in many female hormone regulating and balancing formulas. It is a diaphoretic emmenagogue. To top it off, Charaka declares it the best digestive and carminative for promoting gastrointestinal absorption.

The name for this beautiful deep red herb is japa, because it strengthens devotion in meditation with a mantra (japa). Hibiscus flowers (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*) are used to destroy all life obstacles, spiritual and material, and to assist in realization of all goals. They are said to purify the physical and spiritual heart, and to promote wisdom.

A cooling herb, it makes a good beverage for reducing the effects of summer heat. It is astringent and sweet. In the body, hibiscus is a blood cleanser, and is generally beneficial for kidneys and reproduction (first and second chakra disorders), especially those due to heat and congestion. Japa flowers nourish the skin and hair. Hibiscus has detoxifying actions in the body. It is used to improve the complexion and to enhance normal hair growth. Ayurvedic practitioners use it to normalize menstruation.

Ayurveda says that hibiscus flower increases devotion, promotes wisdom and aids in meditation. It purifies the heart. For the physical heart, hibiscus normalizes blood pressure and has a protective effect on the heart itself. A growing collection of recent research shows that hibiscus protects against liver damage. New research is also underscoring the possibility of hibiscus in normalizing blood sugar.

An exciting herb, shardunika leaf, well known in Ayurvedic medicine, is just beginning to get serious attention here. It is particularly appropriate for American audiences, because it represents a serious chance of supporting blood sugar balance. *Gymnema sylvestre* is a woody climbing plant that grows in the tropical forests of central and southern India. The leaves, when chewed, interfere with the ability to taste sweetness, which explains the Hindi name, gurmar, "destroyer of sugar." Shardunika disables the tongue's ability to taste sweet taste for about 4 hours when a leaf or a pinch of powder is chewed. Gurmar carries astringent and pungent tastes, with a net heating effect. It balances Kapha and essentially neutral to Pitta and Vata.

Gymnema certainly could be the backbone of a natural blood sugar balance program. This herb has been used in India for the treatment of prameha for over 2,000 years. Used primarily for sustaining normal blood sugar in adults, it continues to perform like a champion for those who use it.

When we need mental peace and rest, we may call upon shankhpushi herb (*Evolvulus alsinoides*) to help restore clear quality of the mind. Its flowers resemble the shankha or conch shell, thus the name. It usually is a foot tall plant, with dome of flowers, in open fields in North India.

This herb is an outstanding rejuvenative tonic for the mind and nerve tissue. The plant is said to have profound mystical properties, with an affinity for the heart, throat, third eye and crown chakras. Shankhpushpi is especially effective for mental disorders of anxiety and fear. Often taken with or prepared in ghee, it promotes tranquility without dulling the mind. In depression, it uplifts. In mania it is calming. Students may use it for

exam phobia. To enhance attention, it combines well with brahmi, jatamansi, calamus and licorice. For sleep, take shankpushpi at bedtime. According to the Astanga Hridayam, ghee, cooked three times with shankpushpi juice and milk, makes even the dullest mind sharp.