

All About Licorice

Licorice, officially known as *Glycyrrhiza glabra*, is a European plant belonging to the pulse family, Leguminosae. The root of the licorice plant when pounded or pressed manufactures a sweet substance for which it was widely known. Since ancient time, the licorice root has been used for medicinal purposes. It was used as a laxative and as a cure for coughs. It was also brewed for candy and for flavoring, like in some tobacco.

The Licorice Plant

Licorice is a perennial plant with blue pea-shaped blossoms. It is primarily cultivated in the Middle East, although a subspecies of it, the wild licorice *Glycyrrhiza lepidota*, is native to North America. Currently, there are 14 known varieties of the licorice plant. Most types of licorice are found in several Asiatic regions, Southeast Europe, and Persia.

The licorice plant has long graceful stems and lightly spreading, pinnate leaves. From a distance, they display an almost feathery appearance because of their tiny leaflets which resemble those of the False Acacia. At night, the leaves hang down on each side of the midrib. The flowers are little, growing from the axils of the leaves. Licorice flowers are purplish in color and occasionally pale-blue, violet, or yellowish-white. At the peak of maturity, small pods are formed which somewhat resemble a partly grown peapod.

Health Advantages

The licorice plant has an extensive history in herbal medicine and folk healing. The legend of its uses is long and varied. In Ancient China, licorice was thought as one of the most important herbs in traditional medicine. It is used primarily as a demulcent for its soothing and coating effects in the digestive and urinary tracts. Additionally, Chinese folk healers used it to cure a whole array of conditions, including diabetes and tuberculosis.

Since the ancient times, the plant has been commonly used in connection with the treatment for coughs, sore throats, and as a flavoring. As a matter of fact, it got its name from the Greek word for "sweet root."

More up-to-date studies have shown that licorice contains compounds, called glycyrrhizin and flavonoids. Glycyrrhizin, according to some studies, has anti-inflammatory properties and may have inhibiting actions that hinder the breakdown of cortisol, an important substance produced by the body.

Although it has yet to be proven to work in humans, licorice may also have anti-viral properties. The flavonoids found in this herb are powerful antioxidants that work to protect several organs of the body, most importantly the liver. Chalcones, which are closely related to flavonoids may also help treat digestive tract cells. Preliminary studies on the results of licorice have shown that the flavonoids can kill the ulcer-causing bacteria, *Helicobacter pylori*. These bacteria are responsible for most stomach inflammations as well.

Liquiritin, an extract made from licorice, has been used as a treatment for melasma, a pigmentation disorder of the skin. According to a study conducted by medical researchers, 70 percent improvement is observed on melasma patients after a twice daily topical application of liquiritin cream for a duration of four weeks.

Purchasing Information

When using licorice, keep in mind that there are two types available in the market. The first is the "standard" licorice which contains glycyrrhizin and used to treat respiratory infections, chronic fatigue syndrome, or herpes. The second type is called the "de-glycyrrhizinated" licorice used to relieve conditions of the digestive tract, such as ulcers.

Licorice is sold in capsules or in tablets. For canker sores, de-glycyrrhizinated licorice in powdered form is suggested.