

Herbs from a Classical Chinese Perspective

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When I give a lecture about Chinese herbs I am invariably asked which herbs are good for such-and-such conditions. From a Western scientific perspective these are relatively easy questions to answer. Suffering from inflammation? Try turmeric. Want to quite smoking? Try lobelia. Easy peasy. From a Chinese medical perspective, however, giving such pat answers is much more difficult.

First, most people I meet want to know how Chinese herbs treat Western diseases. This is already a challenge (without a full diagnosis) because Chinese medical theory is based on patterns, not diseases. This means that Chinese herbal theory requires the practitioner to determine what underlying situation is creating the disease before prescribing. The result is that an herb which is good for one type of cough (for example), may be terrible for another type of cough.

Second, Chinese herbs are rarely prescribed one and at time. In fact, some popular classical formulas combine more than twenty herbs! While Chinese herbal theory and clinical experience support such complex formulations, narrowing down an “active herb” in such cases is not possible.

Finally, Chinese herbs often involve special preparations. Even common herbs such as ginger and licorice do very different things when prepared differently. This being the case, the suitability of an herb to treat a disease changes with the method of preparation.

Bearing in mind the above, there are actually very few instances where I can say that a particular Chinese herb can treat a particular disease...and this can sometimes leave my audience at a loss. Even so, for those intrepid kitchen explorers who want to give something a try, I do make the following suggestions:

Fresh ginger often works for nausea, vomiting and digestive upset.

Dang Gui is frequently used as a woman's tonic. (Not for use with blood thinners).

And Goji berries boiled with Chrysanthemum flowers are wonderful for dry, tired eyes.

(If you are pregnant or nursing, avoid using medical herbs except under the supervision of a qualified healthcare practitioner.)