

TCM: Take it or leaf it

Perilla is an annual herb of the mint family native to east Asia. The leaf, stem and seed are widely used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat a variety of ailments. The herb is pungent and aromatic in flavour and warm in nature. It is usually plucked in summer and dried in the shade.

Traditionally, the purple-leafed variety is used for medicinal purposes. According to TCM theory, perilla acts on the lung and spleen meridians. Its therapeutic functions include relieving asthma or respiratory tract problems and regulating gastrointestinal functions. It's also used as an antiseptic.

Perilla leaf is particularly suitable for treating colds accompanied by a cough. Apricot kernel and perilla leaf powder is a formula often prescribed for conditions whose symptoms include headaches, chills, coughs and a stuffy nose. The formula is usually used for upper respiratory tract infections, chronic bronchitis and emphysema. Perilla leaf can also be combined with tangerine peel and agastache to treat abdominal distention, anorexia and vomiting. When used with ginger, it can counteract so-called "fish and crab poison", a Chinese term for food allergies.

Perilla stem is used in remedies for pain relief, morning sickness and a restless fetus in pregnancy. Perilla seed, which contains lubricating oil, is used for relieving breathing difficulties, as an expectorant and for easing constipation.

The green perilla leaf is also a popular herb used in Asian cooking. It is often used as a garnish, in tempura, in salad and in miso soup. In Korean cuisine it is used as an alternative to lettuce to wrap meat for barbecuing. It is also indispensable for sushi and sashimi dishes for flavouring and the prevention of food poisoning. Chinese always add perilla leaf when cooking hairy crabs to eliminate the "cold" nature of the crabs.

Perilla has long been used to treat inflammatory conditions, and pharmacology studies have confirmed the efficacy of its traditional applications. Its major ingredients are volatile compounds that are mostly concentrated in the leaf.



Perilla leaf extract can stimulate sweating and reduce fever by expanding superficial blood vessels; relieve and smooth muscle spasms to ease windpipe contractions; promote digestive secretions; enhance gastrointestinal movements and inhibit the growth of germs and fungi. Experiments have confirmed that extracts of perilla leaf can suppress the overproduction of important enzymes along the inflammatory pathway. Luteolin and tormentic acid have been identified as the substances in the leaf that have this effect. An animal study produced a similar result, with the application of tormentic acid from the dried leaf associated with a significant reduction in induced ear inflammation in mice.

Other recent studies have also revealed that perilla leaf extracts are useful in treating cancers and various other diseases and disorders. It is believed that perillaldehyde, the main ingredient in perilla, has a potent inhibitory effect on human lung and tongue cancer cells.

Perilla can also function as an insect repellent when applied to the skin and clothes.

Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton are with Integrated Chinese Medicine Holdings (icm.com.hk). Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner.