

TCM: tree of Beijing

Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton

The oriental arborvitae signifies antiquity in Chinese culture, and is often referred to as the tree of Beijing. It is a conifer, an evergreen tree from the cypress family widely used in bonsai and often found in classical gardens. The name arborvitae is the Latin "tree of life" and is associated with long life and vitality in Buddhist philosophy.

The tree's oil, resin, fruit, twigs and leaves all have medicinal values, but only the seed and leaves are commonly used in traditional Chinese medicine.

Chinese arborvitae seeds, also known as biota seeds, are collected from the fruit of the tree after being shelled and dried in autumn and winter. The seed works on the heart, kidney and large intestine meridians, has a sweet flavour and is considered neutral in property. It is used as a sedative to treat palpitations, anxiety, insomnia and night sweats. As it is rich in oil, it helps prevent dry stools or constipation.

According to TCM, the heart is in charge of mental activities. Dream-disturbed sleep accompanied by

palpitations, restlessness and forgetfulness indicates a weakened heart. Biota seeds can help by nourishing the heart and calming the spirit. The seeds are often used in tonics that tend to stimulate the heart and relieve stress and fatigue.

A common traditional formula, Heaven King Heart-Nourish Pellets, contains 14 herbs including ginseng. It is good for tonifying the heart and calming the spirit, with no known side effects. When insomnia is associated with panic attacks and night sweats, a severe heart disharmony has developed. Biota seeds may be prescribed alongside schisandra, ginseng and oyster shell.

Constipation is commonly seen in the elderly and postpartum women, and TCM believes this can be resolved by "moistening" the large intestine. Biota seeds can be prescribed with hemp seed and bunge cherry seed for this purpose.

For those with chronic constipation accompanied by dizziness, weakness, forgetfulness and dream-disturbed sleep, a prescription named the Five Seed Pill may be suitable. The seeds, which have astringent properties,

can also be used to treat nosebleeds, piles and burns.

Biota seeds contain chemicals such as saponins, lipids, proteins, phosphorus, calcium and iron. Saponins are believed to be useful for controlling cholesterol and killing protozoa in the intestines.

The normal dose of biota seeds is 6 to 15 grams daily in decoction. They are usually crushed before decocting in order to facilitate the extraction of the active constituents. It should be used with caution by patients with loose stools, diarrhoea or excess sputum.

Little scientific research has been done on biota seeds. All health claims for this herb are based on its uses in TCM and herbalists' experience.

The herb must be stored in a cool dry place even if it is dried because the oil in the seeds may cause them to deteriorate in wet and sunny conditions.

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