

TCM: acanthopanax bark

In ancient China, acanthopanax bark (*wu jia pi*) was a popular herbal supplement among Taoists seeking enlightenment. The root of the plant was steamed and brewed with wine. When taken regularly, it was said to replenish one's essence and strengthen mental power. The great Chinese poet Li Bai is said to have used the herb to boost his creativity when composing many of his famous poems. Other writers took acanthopanax bark as well, so it became known as the "literary herb".

This plant is native to East Asia, and commonly grows on mountain slopes on the mainland and Japan. The roots are collected in summer and autumn, and washed and cleaned. The bark is stripped off and left to dry in the sun. There are several varieties of the plant used in TCM applications, but *acanthopanax gracilistylus* is the only one to have been officially recorded in the pharmacopoeia, the others are substitutes.

According to TCM theory, acanthopanax bark has pungent, bitter and warm properties. It targets the liver and kidneys and is mainly used for joint

or limb problems. The bark helps relieve rheumatic pain and arthritis when combined with quince fruit and cyathula root. It can be used with atractylodes rhizome and Chinese cypress bark for acute stages of muscular atrophy. And it also promotes the healing of bone fractures when combined with psoralea and frankincense. It can be used to reinforce weak livers or kidneys in the elderly, and also improve degenerative conditions such as weak knees or lower back pain (in this case achyranthes root, eucommia bark and epimedium are used with the herb). Acanthopanax bark is also a diuretic and when used for treating edema or urinary difficulties is mixed with poria, betel nut coat and wolfberry root-bark.

Pharmacological studies have shown that acanthopanax bark has anti-inflammatory, pain killing and sedative properties. It also adjusts the immune modulation, dilates the blood vessels and helps the body handle stressful situations.

This herb can be used alone or with others and is particularly suitable for elderly people who have joint problems. Those with arthritis can make a tea with

15 grams of acanthopanax bark; while for those suffering a nervous breakdown, a tea made with acanthopanax bark (six grams) and schisandra (six grams) is suggested.

There is another variety called prickly acanthopanax root (*ci wu jia*), belonging to the species *acanthopanax senticosus*, which has health promoting properties similar to the above. People may know this herb by its more familiar name, Siberian ginseng. The root is the medicinal part of the herb. TCM believes that this herb is relatively mild and should be combined with others for better clinical action. It is generally indicated for fatigue, a lack of energy, a weak bowel system and insomnia. Prickly acanthopanax root is used with largehead atractylodes rhizome and poria for treating fatigue and poor appetite; while longan aril, sour jujube seed and Chinese arborvitae kernel are used for treating insomnia.

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