

# Goldenseal, a Native American Medicinal Herb

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It is always interesting to learn of healing plants native to North America, as so many of the valuable medicinal herbs cherished by advocates of natural health originate in far parts of the globe.

Goldenseal (*Hydrastis Canadensis*) is one such homegrown healing herb.

Indeed, as far as we know, Native Americans were the first to recognize and make curative use of native American goldenseal, as well as other indigenous plants such as ginseng, lobelia, snake-root, sassafras and many other wondrous weeds! Cherokees mixed goldenseal root powder with bear grease for use as an insect repellent and also utilized tea from the plant as a diuretic, and an eyewash for inflamed eyes.

Catawba Indians boiled the root for jaundice, stomach and digestion problems, and for colds and sore mouth. Kickapoos used goldenseal for purposes similar to the other tribes, especially valuing it for eye relief around campfires and during the smoky prairie autumns. It was also used to treat vaginal problems, gonorrhea and other sexually-related conditions.

The American colonists started acquiring knowledge of indigenous medicinal plants from the Indians as early as the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century when they began settling in Virginia. In early days, this was a necessity as the medicinal plants they had favored overseas were expensive and hard to come by. Fortunately, this new world was blessed with a generous variety of curative plants. In the case of goldenseal, it appears that it was most commonly used as a healing treatment for sore eyes and mouths.

These uses are not only recorded by early medical texts, but in the handwriting of Captain Lewis in 1804, during his expedition with Clark to the Pacific Coast. The plant was collected by Lewis and the notes on the original herbarium sheet give a detailed description of its preparation as a "sovereign remedy for sore eyes...and excellent mouth water." To make a preparation for eye infections, the rhizome was infused in cold or hot water. (*History of Medicines: Golden Seal in Early American Medical Botany.*)

Goldenseal is a member of the *Ranunculaceae* (buttercup) family and grows naturally in damp meadows and shady woodlands from the northeast corner of South Carolina to the lower half of New York and east to northern Arkansas and the southeast corner of Wisconsin. It was once abundant in Ohio, Indiana, the Virginias, Kentucky and part of Illinois, but large demand over the years has reduced its availability in the wild, as it was an official drug plant in the United States almost continuously from 1830 to 1955.

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> through the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries goldenseal products were marketed by such pharmaceutical companies as Lilly, Thayer, Squibb and Park-Davis. Its use diminished to the point of disappearance with the introduction of

chemical compounds, but today it is among the top selling herbs in the American health food market and is grown commercially across the country, particularly in the Blue Ridge Mountains, as well as in other countries. It has become an important herb in both India's Ayurvedic medicine and Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Goldenseal is a low-growing herbaceous perennial and has a bright yellow rhizome due to the colored alkaloid, berberine, which was often used as a dye. Over time, it has been known by a number of names, including Yellow root, Eye root, Wild turmeric, Indian dye and Indian paint. The goldenseal plant takes up to four years to reach harvest size, and when the plant is mature enough the rhizomes are taken from the ground in autumn.

According to the University of Colorado, it is the berberine found in goldenseal that helps increase the blood supply to the spleen, which also aids the release of compounds that boost the immune system. The alkaloid berberine reduces the effectiveness of microbes by inhibiting their adherence to the host cells. Studies at the University of Maryland Medical Center indicate that the berberine, by activating white blood cells, is helpful in killing select types of harmful bacteria, making goldenseal useful in treating colds, flu and other upper respiratory infections. Laboratory tests have also shown it to be toxic to fungal cells and to some types of cancer cells. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine is currently funding studies on goldenseal's antibacterial mechanisms and potential cholesterol-lowering effects.

The goldenseal herb has been shown to have natural antibiotic, antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties that will benefit the following:

- Immune System—Goldenseal contains certain chemical substances that stimulate the activity of blood cells, aids in the purification of blood and helps balance the various hormones in the glandular system. Goldenseal taken at the first signs of a cold, flu or sore throat may aid in stopping the symptoms from developing.
- Liver, Spleen, Pancreas, Thyroid, Lymphatic System—The berberine contained in goldenseal aids in increasing blood circulation to the liver and spleen and stimulates the secretion of bile, thus assisting the effective functioning of the pancreas, thyroid and lymphatic system.
- Digestive System—Goldenseal is used to ease digestion and often increases the production of bile. It has an astringent effect and certain antibacterial properties that aid in treating digestive tract conditions such as gastritis, e coli and yeast infections. Goldenseal combines well with chamomile and meadowsweet for stomach conditions.
- Skin Conditions—A goldenseal tincture can be used in treating skin infections and inflammations such as eczema, psoriasis and measles.
- Female Issues—Certain chemical substances in goldenseal have been found to help regulate menstrual cycles and also to induce contractions during childbirth. Goldenseal tincture with water can also be used as a douche for curing some forms of vaginal infections, and mixed with rosewater may relieve vaginal irritation and itching.
- Eyes and Mouth—A goldenseal solution is effective as an eye wash for inflamed eyes and such conditions as conjunctivitis and styes. As mentioned above, early

medical practitioners, who relied primarily on botanicals, appear to have prescribed the herb for this purpose more than for any other. Antibacterial properties in goldenseal are also effective in treating mouth ulcers and inflammation caused by gingivitis.

- Nutrition—Goldenseal is not only a unique and valuable source of berberine, it also contains important nutrients such as A, B, C, and E vitamins, calcium, iron, manganese, phosphorus, potassium, selenium and zinc.

We who support and promote natural health and healing believe, like Hippocrates of old, that many of the chronic disease conditions that plague us today could be prevented and even cured by exercise, sun and the wise use of the countless healing herbs and foods that abound on our earth. The parts of the human body are complex and intricately interlinked beyond the understanding of man, even with today's advanced scientific knowledge. Since all life is a part of nature, it only makes sense to appreciate that our bodies are uniquely equipped to function best with a lifestyle in harmony with nature, and avoidance of unnatural and suspect substances.

Organic goldenseal, as well as information on the herb, is available in high quality health food stores and supplement companies. It can be used as a tincture, tablet, capsule, bulk herb, powder and extract. Goldenseal is frequently used in combination with other healing herbs to meet specific needs.

Goldenseal is one of the potent ingredients in the immune complex blend in Optimal Health Systems' Optimal Defense.

*Sources for this article also include: All4naturalhealth.com, Livestrong.com, Healthy.net (Christopher Hobbs), Western Herbs, Natural-herbal-remedies.net.*

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These statements have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration and are not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease.