

Caring for the Whole Body with South American Herbs

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Despite the environmental stresses we face daily, our less than ideal lifestyle choices, and our genetic challenges, we can reap impressive health results through consistent use of therapeutic herbs, which can strengthen the structures and functions of our bodies. Many Americans are familiar with some North American herbs like Echinacea, used to help prevent colds and flu, St. John's wort, used for mood support, and the Chinese herb ginseng, taken for energy support. But for most of us, knowledge stops with fewer than five herbs. In this article, I will introduce you to a handful of very impressive Peruvian herbs, now just becoming available in the larger health food stores, in specialty herb shops, and on health-related Web sites. Unlike Chinese and Ayurvedic herbs, they are easy to understand. Clinical experience and scientific studies have shown them to be highly effective in greatly improving many health issues when used on a frequent or regular basis. Following are some examples of how to use a few of these herbs to support your body.

Hormonal Imbalances

Difficult menstrual periods, PMS, ovarian cysts, difficult menopause, or, in the case of men, issues with early andropause and erectile dysfunction as well as those suffering from chronic adrenal, thyroid, or pancreatic problems may find a stunning herbal helper in a Peruvian root vegetable from the Andes called maca or maca root.¹ Not only has maca clinically proved to be a superb hormone balancer, it appears to strengthen the immune system and to help with the

healthy production of neurotransmitter hormones such as serotonin (regulating mood) and melatonin (regulating sleep).²

Mood Balance

People who are prone to depression or anxiety can often find nutritional/herbal support surprisingly effective. Maca root, by improving hormone balance, also improves serotonin levels.³ The Amazonian wild fruit camu-camu, with more natural vitamin C than any other botanical, also contains phytochemicals that improve mood and has been shown in clinical practice to often work the same day.⁴

Digestion and Elimination

Cat's claw (*Uncaria tomentosa*) ingested as a tea or a water-alcohol extract is considered by many master herbalists to be the herb par excellence for flatulence, headaches (digestion-related), constipation, diarrhea, leaky gut syndrome, Crohn's disease, and ulcers—conditions reflecting chronic inflammatory processes in the stomach and intestines.⁵ Dietary changes are also essential as a high-sugar, low-fiber diet contributes to the loss of a healthy bowel ecology.

Liver and Gall Bladder

The Peruvian herb *chanca piedra* or break-stone (*Phyllanthus niruri* and related species) is the most important herb for people with common liver and gall bladder issues, including gall stones and hepatitis. Both clinical practice and research demonstrate break-stone's antiviral (hepatitis) properties⁶ and its ability to improve the digestion of fats.⁷

People with particular risk factors for liver problems but no demonstrated liver disease would also do well to use break-stone regularly. These factors include a history of hepatitis, obesity, or alcohol use; the regular use of drugs, pharmaceuticals, or hormone therapy; and anyone with regular exposure to environmental toxins, including car exhaust, chemical cleaning, or printing products.⁸ Liver weakness may show up as a feeling of heaviness in the liver, a loss of energy, liver or gall bladder pain, elevated liver enzyme levels, or cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver.

Kidney and Bladder

Break-stone is also the herb of choice for urinary organ issues, including kidney stones,⁹ recurrent kidney or bladder infections,¹⁰ diabetes,¹¹ and high uric acid levels (gout).¹² The kidney and bladder are also highly sensitive to toxic chemicals, and people with high exposure to toxins may benefit from regular use of *chanca piedra*. Scientific research demonstrates break-stone's reduction of elevated aldose reductase levels, the chemical compound that causes peripheral nerve and kidney damage in diabetics.¹³

Immune System and Autoimmune Conditions

There are a number of Peruvian herbs that *support* the immune system without *stimulating* it. These include the Peruvian rainforest botanicals cat's claw,¹⁴ maca,¹⁵ and camu-camu.¹⁶ Research on *Uncaria tomentosa* (the most effective species of cat's claw) shows that its use is linked to an increase in the number of killer T-cells and macrophage cells produced by the body.¹⁷ Clinical experience also suggests that *Uncaria tomentosa* helps create a healthier blood ecology by reducing the C-reactive protein level in the blood (a primary marker for

inflammation)¹⁸ and can reduce tumors,¹⁹ arthritis, allergies, and the symptoms of lupus. Maca, through improved hormone balance, has also been found in clinical practice to improve autoimmune conditions like arthritis and psoriasis.²⁰

Heart and Circulatory System

A high C-reactive protein level—the greatest predictor of heart attack or stroke—can be substantially reduced by regular use of cat's claw.²¹ Cat's claw and break-stone can also help reduce blood pressure.²² Camu-camu, a wild Amazonian fruit supplement, is an extremely rich source of natural vitamin C, the most important vitamin for heart health.

Brain

Research suggests that cat's claw, which has been shown to inhibit inflammation up to 89 percent, may be useful in preventing the formation of the amyloid plaque in the brain associated with Alzheimer's disease.²³ The elevation of a particular liver enzyme level has also recently been implicated in the formation of this plaque. Since break-stone helps normalize elevated liver enzyme levels, it is possible that its regular use may be useful in preventing amyloid plaque formation.²⁴ Camu-camu's high natural vitamin C content helps chelate out heavy metals, believed to play a role in the development of Alzheimer's.²⁵

Vitamin/supplement departments in the health food stores have been around for more than thirty years, but their full potential as herbal apothecaries are just beginning to be explored. As Peruvian herbs become more accessible through these stores and herbal Web sites, and as consumers start to use them based on their friends' recommendations and the research findings, their remarkable effects on health will soon be recognized.

Notes

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3. Ibid.
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About the Author

Dr. Viana Muller is a cultural anthropologist who set up bilingual, bicultural training programs in Mexico, taught African and Latin American cultural studies in several universities, and was a college administrator before she discovered her life’s mission in Peru while studying the plant medicines used by native peoples in the Andes and rainforests. Going through a difficult menopause, she stumbled across the then unknown maca root, which changed her life in just a

few days. Returning to the United States, she cofounded Whole World Botanicals (<http://www.wholeworldbotanicals.com>) to make maca available along with cat's claw and other amazing botanicals that she encountered both through her native guides and Peruvian plant pharmacologists.

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