

Red Root

Ceanothus spp.

Borrowed from: *Medicinal Plants of the Pacific West* ~ Michael Moore

Red Crane Books / 1993

MEDICINAL USES Red Root is one of the best examples of and recommendations for using herbs in the subclinical grey area that precedes overt disease. It is an astringent to membranes, and is a good gargle and mouthwash for a sore throat or sores in the mouth. Beyond this, much of its value comes from its effect on the integrity of blood proteins. It

helps increase the quality of blood charge, thereby increasing the repelling charge of the capillary cells. With improved charges, there is improved transport of blood fluid out into the interstitial colloids and more efficient uptake of lymph, as well as return of fluid back into the blood exiting the capillaries into the veins. Remember, the lymph is simply part of the blood, temporarily shunted through back alleys, cleaning up garbage too large to be absorbed directly into the venous capillaries, and with its trash gradually broken down and nosed through by white blood cells, it is returned back into the subclavian veins.

One of the best uses of Red Root is for liver headaches and inflammation from blood fats. Picture this: late evening, a meal of green chile chicken enchiladas with sour cream and cheese, a couple of glasses of wine, and greasy sopaipillas with honey. The green chile and alcohol dilate the intestinal membranes; the sour cream and cheese contain butterfat, the fat that doesn't need bile to digest, and it is absorbed rapidly into the portal blood that drains from the GI tract to the liver. The fats, rapidly absorbed, flood through the liver into general circulation. Blood fats have little or no electrical charge, unlike the blood proteins, and they can exit the capillaries easily, particularly when you are tired and greased out. Fats stimulate the mast cells that are found around the capillaries, those cells that are responsible for histamine release during tissue stress. Histamines dilate the capillaries, making them more permeable, and your eyes get red, your head starts to ache, you itch, your joints get painful—whatever you are prone to, you get. Take some Red Root, get that blood charge back a bit, decrease the effects of the blood fats, feel better. You see, Red Root isn't for headaches, just certain kinds; it isn't for arthritis, just certain kinds; this differentiation is too subtle for use in medicine, but just right for herbology. I use a dark-field microscope to observe live blood, and after such a meal, my blood is full of blood fats (chylomicrons), and my red blood cells (RBC), normally repelling each other by a like membrane charge, stick together in long rolls, or *rouleau*. You can imagine how hard it is to squeeze these adhering RBC rolls through the fine capillary beds in the brain—or the fingers or lungs. If I take some Red Root (a couple of squirts of the tincture will do it), an hour later the blood fats may still be there, but the red blood cells are no longer clumped in rolls; instead, they are dispersed across the slide.

In general, with its positive effects on the blood charges and its improvement of interstitial fluid and lymph passage, Red Root is helpful in a variety of conditions. It won't *cure* you—just make you better able to cure yourself. The tea is very effective when used during tonsillitis; make up a quart of the cold infusion and sip the whole thing during the day. For inflammation or swelling of the lymph nodes, the tincture or tea helps immensely. It won't get rid of the cause of the inflammation (usually an infection or allergy), but it strengthens the node tissues while

immunologic responses continue. In portal congestion, with aching hemorrhoids, varicose veins, and cervical or prostate congestion, use Red Root. Because it stimulates fluid drainage from congested tissues, it is *always helpful with breast cysts, ovarian cysts, or other hydroceles, if taken with something that stimulates the blood supply to those tissues.* For ovarian and testicular cysts, it can be combined with Don Quai, Blue Cohosh, or *Helonias*. For breast cysts (*Chamaelirium*) that enlarge and shrink with your hormone cycle, combine the Red Root with Milkweed, Cotton Rootbark, or 3 to 5 drop doses of *Phytolacca* tincture (fresh Poke Root tincture available from an N.D. or, as a mother tincture, from an M.D. homeopath).

Because it acts to tonify the structure of lymph tissue, Red Root is often helpful for hepatitis or mononucleosis, when the spleen is enlarged and painful but the actual infection is on the way out. I am not claiming cure in such cases, only a strengthening of certain tissues during a disease process. In the alphabet viruses, CFS, EBV, or CMV (even HIV), the chronic congestion of lymph pulp can be helped with regular use of Red Root. In the lymph "system," you have cells that do stuff, such as lymphocytes like T-Cells (parenchymal cells), and cells that act to hold things together in a tight, controlled package (mesenchymal or structural cells). Red Root doesn't stimulate the active cells of immunity; it stimulates the structural or connective cells that form the organ within which the lymph cells work.

Red Root is an excellent home remedy for menstrual hemorrhage, nosebleeds, bleeding piles, hemorrhoids and old ulcers, and capillary ruptures from vomiting or coughing; it should also be used by heavy drinkers with gastritis, whiskey nose, and other symptoms of capillary fragility. The tincture of California Lilac was used by the homeopath Boericke for sore throat, inflamed tonsils, sinus inflammations, and diphtheria, both internally and as a gargle. The leaves can be used for tea, especially *C. velutinus*, and the fresh flowers can be used for a feeble but elegant soap.

CONTRAINDICATIONS Red Root has been used experimentally to improve blood coagulation (in people) and as an anticoagulant (in veterinary medicine). Both uses have been discarded, since the effects are *tonic* to the blood proteins and have no predictable drug effect in medical practice. Still, you may wish to avoid it if you have overt blood disorders or if you are taking medication that is meant to affect blood clotting. If you have a specific allergy to aspirin products, you might find that some species of Red Root may trigger a mild response. Just out of normal conservatism, I would recommend only moderate use during pregnancy.

In general, there is little information regarding drug reactions with Red Root. It is a rather benign but complex herbal medicine, and, except to aid lymph structure in slow viruses and tonify the spleen during liver and lymph viruses, I would suggest not using Red Root if you are under medical care for an overt disease. Red Root is for healthy people under stress, not for sick folks under treatment—the best kind of herb.

Red Root

Borrowed from: *Western Herbs According to Traditional Chinese Medicine*
~ Thomas Avery Garran
Healing Arts Press / 2008

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Red Root

Ceanothus spp.

Rhamnaceae

Ceanothi cortex seu radices

Also known as New Jersey tea, California lilac, buckbrush, Oregon tea tree

Flavor and Qi: bitter, slightly acrid, warm

Channels Entered: liver, spleen, gallbladder

Actions: antispasmodic, astringent, expectorant

Functions and Indications

- **Quickens the blood, transforms blood stasis, resolves qi stagnation, and softens hardness.** Red root is employed in the treatment of concretions and conglomerations; slow-healing ulcers; headache; painful, bleeding hemorrhoids; varicose veins; pain in the lower burner (e.g., prostate or cervical pain); breast cysts; and ovarian cysts. This is an important medicinal for the treatment of blood and qi depression. Red root enters the qi of the blood, quickening it and transforming stasis with bitterness and acidity. Its warm and acrid nature resolves qi stagnation. This combination of flavors and qi works to soften hardness and effectively treat concretions and conglomerations, as well as localized depression of blood and qi that causes conditions such as slow-healing ulcers, varicose veins, hemorrhoids, and various painful conditions of the lower burner.
- **Quickens the blood and stops bleeding.** Red root is used to treat bleeding patterns due to blood stasis with or without heat in the blood, with symptoms such as nosebleed, vomiting of blood, coughing blood, and excessive menstrual bleeding. When using red root to treat bleeding due to heat with stasis, remember that it does not have a cooling nature, and therefore must be used in combination with heat-clearing medicinals. However, this medicinal moves the blood in a fashion that lends itself to the treatment of bleeding due to stasis. Red root is also used as a gargle for sore throats.



Red root (*Ceanothus oliganthus*)

CAUTIONS

None noted.

Dosage and Preparation

Use 3–9 g in decoction; 2–4 ml tincture.

Gather the root bark, and occasionally, stem bark, in early spring, before the plant has flowered. The bark can be chopped to make fresh plant tincture or allowed to dry for future use. Good-quality dried root bark of red root is brown, black, or gray outside, bright red to brownish red inside, and astringent in the mouth.

Major Combinations

- Combine with cleavers and figwort to treat swellings in the neck and throat.



Red root flowers (*Ceanothus* sp.)

- Combine with ocotillo for hemorrhoids due to repletion. For stubborn or chronic cases, add moutan peony, peach kernel, or ligusticum to treat blood-heat, dryness, and wind associated with the condition.
- Combine with curcuma (*yù jīn*) and sparganium for concretions and conglomerations.
- Combine with cyperus and curcuma (*yù jīn*) for accumulations.
- Combine with echinacea and thyme as a gargle for painful sore throat due to wind heat. To make a pleasant and effective formula for this purpose, combine one part each red root, echinacea, thyme, osha, and black sage, and squeeze a little lemon juice into the mix.

Commentary

Red root is one of the most unique medicinals in North America, and consequently, this was one of the most difficult herb entries to write. While extremely helpful, red root does not produce extremely obvious responses and is nearly always used in combination with other medicinals, even in the Western model. This makes it difficult to ascertain its exact actions from the perspective of Chinese medicine. In his *Medicinal Plants of the Pacific West*, herbalist Michael Moore states, “Red root is one of the best examples of and recommendations for using herbs in the subclinical grey area that precedes overt disease.” This is not meant to imply that

red root is not useful in overt disease—it is. Later in his monograph, Moore says, “It won’t *cure* you—just make you better able to cure yourself.” This implies the herb assists or encourages the body to make adjustments so it can heal. It acts on blood proteins and, according to Moore,

It helps increase the quality of blood charge, thereby increasing the repelling charge of the capillary cells. With improved charges, there is improved transport of blood fluid out into the interstitial colloids and more efficient uptake of lymph, as well as return of fluid back into the blood exiting capillaries into the veins.¹⁰

This suggests an action on the blood and lymph, leading me to the conclusion that red root works on the blood as it is understood in Chinese medicine. When added to formulas composed according to the Chinese medical paradigm, red root is especially useful when there is obvious lymph involvement. However, I have learned that red root is an important part of most formulas designed to treat any accumulation of blood from *qi* stagnation, damp stagnation, or heat.

The Okanagon of Washington state and the Canadian border area, and the Thompson people of southwestern British Columbia, administered *Ceanothus velutinus* both internally and externally for pain.¹¹ The Thompson also used this species to treat rheumatic complaints internally and externally.¹² The Alabama prepared a decoction of *C. americanus* root as a bath for injured legs and feet.¹³ The Cherokee of the Carolinas used the same species as an infusion held in the mouth for toothache.¹⁴ The Iroquois of upstate New York and southern Quebec took a decoction for delayed menses due to catching a cold, as well as to abort a fetus injured in the first two to three months of pregnancy.¹⁵

The genus name *Ceanothus* comes from a Greek word meaning thorny plant. The common name New Jersey tea refers to the historical use of the leaves of the East Coast red root species as a substitute for tea (*Camellia sinensis*) during the American Revolution.