



# Ho Shu Wu

## Chinese Antiaging Tonic

Ho shu wu (also known as fo-ti, ho shou wu, he shou wu, flowery knotweed, and fleecflower) is a Chinese tonic herb. Its uses were first recorded in Kai pao pen tsao. Its name literally means Mr. Ho's hair is black (shou = head, wu = black). The name is based on a story about a 58-year-old gentleman named Ho, whose gray hair turned black again after taking the herb. He also became more youthful and was able to father several children. Supposedly he was able to live to 160, retaining his black hair. There are numerous variations of this story, but all center on the fact that the herb not only restored normal hair color, it restored vitality, strength and sexual vigor.

While it is probable that these tales are highly exaggerated or completely fictitious accounts, ho shu wu does have a solid reputation in China as an antiaging herb, and there is plenty of historical, clinical, scientific evidence that demonstrates its value as a medicinal herb.

Ho shu wu has a bitter, sweet flavor with an astringent nature. Energetically, it is a warming herb, used as a tonic for rebuilding weakened conditions. In China it is used to strengthen the body and nourish the vital essence, or basic life energy. It primarily affects the liver and kidneys, nourishing the "yin" energy of both of these organs. Some of its traditional indications in Chinese medicine include: pain in the loins and knees, involuntary seminal emission, bleeding, intestinal gas, and malaria.

The botanical name for ho shu wu is *Polygonum multiflorum*. The *Polygonum* genus contains a number of useful medicinal plants, including the Western herb bistort (*Polygonum bistorta*). All of these plants contain tannins, which make them astringent, meaning they tone tissues and arrest discharges.

What makes ho shu wu interesting is that it also contains anthraquinones, the same compounds found in cascara sagrada and senna. This gives the herb a mild laxative effect. The combination of a stimulant laxative action and an astringent action, makes ho shu wu useful for a variety of gastrointestinal problems. In India it is used for colic and enteritis; in Brazil, it is used for hemorrhoids, in China for ulcerations.

Ho Shu Wu also has some definite circulatory-enhancing properties. Studies have confirmed the plant has the ability to reduce hypertension and blood cholesterol. In addition to directly inhibiting cholesterol, it also decreases cholesterol absorption in the digestive tract. In one study in China, over 80% of high cholesterol patients showed improvement when taking a decoction of the root.

Ho shu wu also helps inhibit the formation of arterial plaque, thus reducing the risk of heart disease. One of the major

constituents of this plant is lecithin, a substance that works with cholesterol in the body, which may account for some of these effects.

In Chinese herbal medicine, the most important properties of ho shu wu are its abilities to strengthen liver and kidney function. These are the primary organs that cleanse the blood, giving the plant a tonic action for the blood. It is used for dizziness, weakness, numbness, blurred vision and other symptoms of "blood deficiency." It is also useful for backache, a common symptom of kidney weakness.

Ho shu wu has some infection fighting qualities. It has been found useful for tuberculosis, malaria, and some types of viral infections. There is also some evidence that ho shu wu can help increase sugar levels in the blood, making it useful for hypoglycemia.

Considering the overall properties of this plant, it is obvious why it would earn the reputation as an antiaging herb. Its ability to aid the cardiovascular system alone makes it a useful tonic to counteract some of the effects of aging.

But, what about ho shu wu's reputation for restoring color to gray hair? Although there isn't a lot of scientific data to support this claim, there is folk evidence for it, and clinical trials of various formulas containing ho shu wu in China suggest it may be useful in treating alopecia or hair loss. According to the Chinese medicine, the health of the hair is governed by the kidneys and "liver blood." The kidneys are also thought to govern the bone marrow, and the health of the teeth is connected to the quality of the bone marrow. So, ho shu wu may help us hold onto both our hair and our teeth as we age.

Ho shu wu has also been marketed under the name fo-ti. There is no such herb in China, and the name was invented by Western marketers trying to make an association with a proprietary formula called Fo-Ti-Teng.

Ho shu wu is a gentle, tonic herb that must be taken regularly over a period of many months to have optimal effects. It is very safe and can be consumed in doses up to 5 grams per day (about 8 capsules). Recommended dose is 2-4 capsules twice daily.

### Selected References

- The Scientific Validation of Herbal Medicine* by Daniel B. Mowrey.
- The Encyclopedia of Medicinal Plants* by Andrew Chevallier
- Oriental Materia Medica: A Concise Guide* by Hong-Yen Hsu
- Ho shou wu: What's in an Herb Name?* by Subhuti Dharmananda

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