

The Amazing Adaptogens ~ HERBS FOR LONGEVITY AND WELL BEING

By Rosemary Gladstar

Adaptogens...this word is the new buzz word in herbalism and herbs classified as adaptogens are the new super stars of the herbal world. And for good reason. Adaptogenic herbs boost energy, restore vitality, and help raise the body's ability to deal with the stresses of modern life with no harmful side effects. They are also the prime herbs used for increasing life force and longevity. Broadly speaking an Adaptogen can be any substance or life style change that helps one adjust or adapt to our modern day environment, but the term is most often used to describe a group of herbs that have a long history of promoting longevity and increasing the over all strength and resiliency of our bodies.

The term, adaptogen, is fairly new and won't be found in any of the older herbals, i.e. those written before 1950, or even a dictionary, yet is a common term amongst herbalists and holistic practitioners and is used to describe a highly regarded and well known group of herbs. Coined by a Russian scientist, Dr. Lazarev in the late 1940's, adaptogen was used to describe any substance that: (a) had a normalizing effect on our system without harmful side effects and (b) worked by a 'non specific' action to increase resistance to illness through a wide range of physical and biochemical factors. Dr. Lazarev's student, Dr. Brekhman, a holistically minded doctor with an interest in herbalism, furthered Lazarev's work by researching herbs that a history of 'adaptogenic' like qualities. He focused his work primarily on *Eleutherococcus senticosus* (Siberian Ginseng) and *Panax ginseng* (Asian varieties of ginseng) and conducted thousands of studies that proved that these herbs had the unique ability to help the body adapt to the stresses of modern life and increase adaptability to our environment.

Though the term adaptogen may be new, the knowledge of herbs with 'adaptogenic' qualities, i.e. those herbs used to promote and enhance longevity, have been around for generations. In Traditional Chinese herbalism, these herbs were termed "Superior Medicine" and were among the most widely used of the Chinese herbs. Superior Medicines, like adaptogens, were safe and non-toxic, increased resistance to illness, and was used to promote health and longevity. In Ayurvedic Medicine, a system originating in India, herbs that had the ability to sustain and nourish life were called Rasayna herbs and a whole system of practice developed around this special group of restorative plants. In Western or American Herbalism, these herbs were classified as Herbal Tonics and used to treat a wide range of imbalances as well as to increase longevity.

No matter what they're called, Superior Medicines, Herbal Tonics, Longevity herbs or Adaptogenics, these are among our most well known herbs and well suited for the stresses of modern day life! Traditionally, these herbs were often incorporated into one's meals, cooked into soups, sprinkled into food, or made into syrups, tonic drinks, and delicious spreads that were enticing to eat. Of course, one can take them as capsules and tinctures as well ~ there are many fine adaptogenic and longevity formulas available ~ but most herbalists prefer to use these particular herbs as food rather than 'medicine'.

Adaptogens: A term coined in 1947 by a Russian scientist, adaptogens describe substances that increase the body's ability to adapt to the stress of these modern times and increases inherent resistance to disease. Adaptogenics are identified by their non-specific, broad health benefits. They increase the body's inherent life force, increase stamina and endurance and improve the overall quality of physical well being. By their very nature, adaptogens are non-toxic and have no side effects even when used over a long period of time.

Longevity: Longevity ~ a long duration and healthy duration of life

The Worlds Most Famous Adaptogens and Longevity herbs used for 'Saging', or 'Aging with Grace' include the following:

Ashwaganda (Withania somnifera)

An ancient Ayurvedic herb, Ashwaganda is referred to in India as the 'Indian Ginseng' and is an excellent adaptogenic herb. It increases the body's overall ability to adapt to and resist stress. In India it is used to increase memory and facilitate learning and is specifically indicated for reduced levels of energy, general debilitation reduced sexual energy, nervous tension, stress, and anxiety.

Preparation tips: Ashwaganda has a peculiar taste and odor, but can be blended with other more flavorful herbs such as ginger, sarsaparilla, and cinnamon to make a nice tasting tea. In India, the root is powdered and mixed with milk for a classic rejuvenating drink. Try blending it with your favorite chi tea blend for a delicious restorative drink.

Astragalus (Astragalus membranaceus)

A wonderfully energizing and tonic herb, astragalus is one of the most outstanding herbs for building immune strength and energizing the entire body. It stimulates the deep immune system and helps to rebuild the bone marrow reserve that supports and regenerates the body's 'protective shield' or immune system. It is used to both prevent and treat long-term infections including chronic colds, repeating flus, candida and Epstein-Barr syndrome. Astragalus also promotes circulatory health and stimulates metabolism of dietary sugars, thus is often used by people with diabetes.

There have been several promising studies on using astragalus with cancer patients undergoing radiation and/or chemotherapy. One study published in Cancer, a publication of the American Cancer Society, reported that an aqueous extract of astragalus improved the immune function in 90% of the cancer patients studied. In studies done over an eight-year period at the National Cancer Research Institute and five other research institutes, astragalus was shown to improve the immune system of cancer patients as well as lessen the negative side effects of the cancer treatment. Working as a true adaptogen, the herb strengthens the immune system's ability to resist infection thereby contributing to the overall well being of the patient.

Astragalus is one of the most popular tonic herbs in China and is often called the 'young people's ginseng' as it is specifically indicated as an energizer for younger people, though it is equally important for elderly people as well. It is one of the most important

herbs used in Chinese fu-zheng therapy, a system of herbalism that treats disease by enhancing the over all system and normalizing the ‘chi’ or central energy of the body.

Preparation Tips: The root is often sliced, pressed, and cured in honey and bears a remarkable resemblance to the tongue depressors used by dentists. Look for long wide straight roots, generally whitish or cream colored with a yellowish core. The root has a sweet flavor and blends well with other herbs. The chopped roots are made into a flavorful tea, the powder makes a delicious paste when mixed with honey, and the root is often added to warming soups as they slowly simmer.

Ginseng (Panax and related species)

Ginseng has the reputation of being one of the world’s best longevity and adaptogenic herbs and is renowned for its ability to promote vitality, improve immune function and over all well being. It has a long history of use and is considered a superior tonic herb in every country in which it is found growing. The name, Panax, is derived from the Greek *pan*, ‘all’, and *akos*, ‘cure’ or cure all, though ginseng is most often regarded as a tonic or adaptogenic agent rather than a specific curative. In traditional Chinese herbalism, ginseng is said to promote a long and happy life. It is used to benefit the spirit or mind as well as the physical body. There are several species of ginseng with subtle differences between them, but all contain adaptogenic properties and all are used to promote longevity and well being. Select roots that are at least 6 years or older and try to purchase organically cultivated roots and/or woods stimulated roots (cultivated in the woodlands) when possible. Commercial ginseng is often cultivated under intensive conditions with pesticides and fungicides and is of inferior quality. Buy ginseng from reputable growers and try to buy organically cultivated whenever possible.

Preparation tips: Ginseng has a fine robust flavor and makes a nice beverage tea. It blends well with many other herbs. Try serving it with ginger and cinnamon in a chi type blend. Sliced and soaked in honey, it makes a tasty treat. Ginseng powder is also mixed with other tonic herbs, blended with honey and spices to make a delicious concoction that can be used directly in tea or spread on crackers.

Warning: American Ginseng is seriously stressed in its native habitat and is included on the United Plant Savers’ At Risk list. Use only organically cultivated or woods grown ginseng (ginseng that’s been planted and tended in woodland settings).

Siberian Ginseng (Eleutherococcus senticosus)

This is the herb that the term adaptogenic was coined for. Though not a true ginseng, it is a close relative of the Panax family and contains similar properties. A superior adaptogenic and longevity herb, it has an impressive range of health benefits. It is one of the best herbs for increasing endurance and stamina and to build and enhance our resistance to stress factors whether they are emotional, physical or psychological. There are numerous studies on Eleuthero that prove its adaptogenic properties; Russian athletes experienced a 9% improvement in stamina when taking Eleuthero for one month; professional skiers before racing were given 3 dropperfuls of eleuthero which measurably increased their physical endurance and resistance to the cold; one thousand factory workers who took 3 dropperfuls of eleuthero extract daily showed an over all 50% reduction in general sickness and 40% reduction in number of days lost due to illness (*Economic and Medicinal Plant Research*, Vol. I, by Dr. Norman Farnsworth). Unlike

Panax ginseng, Eleuthero is found growing in abundance over a large range in Siberia and other cold northern climates. It is being cultivated in cold northern areas of the United States and grows into a large tree like shrub. **Preparation tips:** The flavor of Eleuthero is rather pleasant and blends well with other tonic and adaptogenic herbs in tea. It is nice mixed with warming spices such as cinnamon and ginger. The powder is often mixed into food and the roots are an important ingredient in 'Long Life' wines and elixirs.

Ho Shou Wu or Fo ti (Polygonum multiflorum)

Next to Ginseng, Ho Shou Wu, or Fo-Ti as it is often called, is the most renowned and the most written about longevity/adaptogenic herb. Its uses were recorded as early as 1578 in the famous Pen Ts'ao, It is said to restore vitality and purportedly, will restore original hair color that has faded or turned silver and has a long reputation as a 'youth preserver, rejuvenator and sexual tonic'. Used for hundreds of years by literally millions of people to increase vitality and inner strength, it has a solid reputation that only seems to increase with time.

Though an important energizer, it is also used during times of stress and anxiety to promote a feeling of calm and relaxation. Modern studies have shown Fo Ti to contain resveratrol and lecithin, compounds that have a beneficial effect on cholesterol levels and enhance circulatory function.

Fo Ti is often combined with other tonic herbs and is found in hundreds of longevity formulas. It was a favorite herb of Li Ch'ing Yuen, a famous scribe of ancient China who wrote about Fo Ti as early as 1578 in the now famous Pen Ts'ao. Li Ch'ing lived to be a venerable elder and credited his longevity to his daily consumption of Ho Shou Wu mixed with ginseng, lycii berries and other tonic herbs.

Preparation tips: It is excellent combined with ginseng, and/or astragalus and/or can be mixed with other powdered herbs such as ginseng, licorice, cinnamon and cardamom into a paste with honey. Spread this paste on toast or crackers or mix in hot water for an 'instant tea'.

Schizandra (Schizandra chinensis)

Called 'five flavored plant' or wu wei tsu in Chinese medicine, Schizandra has five distinguished flavors: sweet, salty, sour, pungent and bitter. Each flavor follows the preceding one until the palette is engulfed in the entire taste sensation. It is said that each flavor activates and balances a different organ system and because of this schizandra is known as a superior tonic herb. It is classified as an adaptogenic herb, raising the body's ability to resist all manners of stress and disease. It has enjoyed a great reputation in China and was used at one time primarily by wealthy upper middle class women as a preserver of youth, a beauty aide, and a powerful sexual tonic. Today, whether wealthy or poor, female or male, we all can receive the benefits of using it

It is a great herb for increasing endurance. On a study done on polo and racehorses, schizandra was proven to increase the speed and recovery time of the animals after racing. Researchers found that horses on schizandra not only increased their 800 meter time from 52.2 to 50.4 seconds (a competitive advantage of six lengths), but also their

breathing and heart rates returned to normal more quickly than those horses that were on the placebo. People too have used schizandra to increase endurance and stamina for hundreds of years.

Preparation Tips: Schizandra berries have a unique flavor; people either love them or not. Mixed with ginseng, they increase stamina and endurance and are often used by those in sports or for long hikes. They can be soaked in fruit juice and/or wine for a tonic drink or cooked in honey until soft and jam like. Added to tea, they add a sour lemon like flavor that is quite pleasant.

Reishi or Ling Zhi (*Ganoderma lucidum*, *G. lucidum*, and *G. applanatum*)

Reishi is known as the ‘mushroom of Immortality’ in Japan and in China the oldest known record on reishi describes the various qualities of Reishi including its beneficial effects on the heart, memory, and as an herb for longevity. It has a remarkably long history of being used as an adaptogenic tonic and is considered ‘the medicine supreme’ for increasing vitality, over all health and well being. It is used for many age related disorders such as coronary heart disease, high cholesterol, arthritis, immune disorders and cancers. Christopher Hobbs, author of Medicinal Mushrooms, states of Reishi, “the list of benefits observed in laboratory and clinic experiments reads like a panacea wish-list’.

Preparation tips: Reishi is tough and fibrous, so is best cooked in soups, or used in powdered or extract form.

Holy Basil (*Ocimum sanctum*)

In India where this herb originates, it is revered as a plant sacred to Lakshmi, wife of Vishnu, the god who preserves life. In India, it’s commonly referred to as Tulsi, which means ‘unmatched’ and in Ayurvedic healing, it is considered ‘matchless’ for cardiovascular problems, hypertension, diabetes, stress, and age related illnesses. Holy Basil, or Tulsi, has a long history of being used to increase energy, vitality and as an herb for longevity and well being. A cousin to Sweet Basil (*O. basilicum*), Holy Basil is easy to grow and is often grown in pots placed on sunny areas around the house as it also repels flies and other insects.

Preparation tips: Holy basil can be used either fresh or dried. It makes a delicious invigorating tea and is often mixed with peppermint and/or lemon balm to make a refreshing beverage blend.

Adaptogens don’t grow in foreign lands only

Though the herbs mentioned in this article are renowned longevity/adaptogenic herbs of China and India, there are many equally important ones found growing on the North American continent and are important adaptogenic tonics in Western Herbalism. Dandelion root (*Taraxacum officinale*), burdock root (*Arctium lappa*), nettle (*Urtica dioica*), milk thistle seed (*Silybum marianum*), ginkgo (*Gingko biloba*), hawthorn (*Crataegus spp.*) and oats (*Avena sativa*) are all considered to be important adaptogenics and are used frequently by herbalists to increase energy, restore vitality and promote a long and healthy life.

ADAPTOGENICS

*Helping our Bodies Adapt to the Stresses of Modern Day Life
With Rosemary Gladstar*

Russian researcher, Dr. Brekhman, used this term in the 1950's while researching herbs that improved energy and work efficiency. An Adaptogenic must meet three criteria:

- 1) Must lack marked toxicity and cause minimal disturbances in the physiological functions of an organism
- 2) Non-specific in action but has a more generalized action in the body. In other words, it is not used for one specific or condition but rather tonifies and builds the entire system
- 3) Normalizing effect on body; i.e. helps the body restore balance and homeostasis.

How Adaptogenics work:

Scientists have tried to pin point exactly how Adaptogenics work. Some theories included:

- Enhance the ability of enzymes to transform glucose into energy
- Activate the synthesis of proteins and nucleic acids
- May possess antioxidant powers limiting pathways of free radicals in the system
- May work in part by positively influencing the secretions of hormones and other chemicals produced by the pituitary, hypothalamus, and adrenal glands

However, despite hundreds of scientific studies published since the 1950's that have tried to define how adaptogens work, they 'hows' are still poorly understood. But there is no question that they do work!

Adaptogens help the body:

- Restore balance
- Increase energy
- Increase immune response
- Improve homeostasis
- Improve brain and memory function
- Balance and normalize over all body energy and health

Important Adaptogens include:

Siberian Ginseng	Ginseng Panax	specials
Reishi, sp.	Schizandra berries	
Rodiola	Ashwagandha	
Holy Basil	Astragalus	
Ho Shou Wu (Fo Ti)	Gota Kola	
Hawthorn Crataegus spp.	Licorice	
Lycii Lycium chinesis	Gingko	
Dandelion Root/Leaf	Burdock Root	

* There are many others found throughout the world

* Recommended reading: *Herbs for Long Lasting Health* by Rosemary Gladstar (Storey Publications); *Adaptogens, Herbs for Stress, Stamina, & Stress Relief* by D. Winston & S. Maimes; *Herbal Tonic Therapies* by D. Mowrey; *Chinese Tonic Therapies* by R. Teeguarden