

Prickly Ash (*Zanthoxylum americanum*, *Zanthoxylum bungeanum*)

Common Names: Angelica tree, xanthoxylum.

Location: Grown throughout China especially in Szechuan province. The “Chinese” prickly ash is also found in the southeastern United States.

Description: Prickly ash is a shrub. The shiny red fruits are gathered in the late summer and fall for culinary and medicinal use.

Properties: The bark of the prickly ash tree is a tonic and circulatory stimulant. It stimulates the lymphatic system and encourages the elimination of toxins. Prickly ash is an anti-microbial and pain-relieving agent.

Uses: It has a relaxing effect on the upper digestive tract and can be helpful for colic, cramping, stomach upset, and vomiting. Benefits of prickly ash for specific health conditions include treatment of circulatory disorders, gallstones and parasitic infection.

Doses: Prickly Ash can be used as a tea or a plaster.

Warnings: Oral consumption of prickly ash should be avoided during pregnancy. It may stimulate immune processes in the mother that may be detrimental to the developing child.

Prickly Ash Bark and Powder Profile

Also known as

Zanthoxylum spp (*clava-herculis* and *americanum*), Szechuan pepper, chuan jiao, Northern Prickly Ash, Ache Tree, Tooth Ache Tree, and Yellow Wood.

Introduction

About 1350, a book entitled the *Ri Yong Ben Cao* (Home Guide to Useful Medicines) first advised Chinese physicians of the medicinal benefits of prickly ash, also known as Szechuan pepper. Before prickly ash was used medicinally, however, it was applied in the Imperial Court as the sole anesthetic for the operation by which the Emperor acquired his court eunuchs. Traditional Chinese Medicine uses prickly ash to warm the "middle burner," the energies in the middle of the body that power the immune response and help digest food. Traditional herbal medicine also uses prickly ash to kill parasites and to alleviate abdominal pain, particularly when the source of the pain is a parasitic infection.

Constituents

Volatile oil containing geraniol.

Parts Used

The bark or the fruit, dried and chopped. The powder is better for poultices than the chopped bark. The chopped bark is better for making teas and tinctures than the powdered bark.

Typical Preparations

Teas or tinctures. Prickly ash powder may be used as a poultice applied to the abdomen to treat abdominal pain (recommended over teas or tinctures for this purpose). Although rare, may also be taken as capsule. Chopped prickly ash bark can be used to make teas or tinctures when combined with: ´ Ginger and/or Panax ginseng for relieving chronic abdominal pain. ´ Ginger to treat nausea and vomiting in long-term illnesses. ´ Mume fruit and coptis or Oregon grape root for treating symptoms caused by roundworms (usually vomiting). The seed or "eyes" of prickly ash are used in teas as an acrid, bitter, and cooling treatment for wheezing or swelling.

Summary

Taken internally or externally, prickly ash bark relieves chronic pain. Usually a prickly ash poultice applied to the skin over the area of pain is more effective than a prickly ash tincture or tea taken by mouth. Test the herb on a small area of skin first to make sure you are not among the very few people sensitive or allergic to the herb.

Precautions

Always seek a medical diagnosis when there is acute abdominal pain. Traditional Chinese Medicine teaches that prickly ash should be avoided when there is fever with profuse sweating, and used with caution during pregnancy. Prickly ash can stop lactation, and should be avoided by mothers wishing to continue nursing. Products made from the American prickly ash (*Zanthoxylum americanum*) can cause sunlight sensitivity. This effect is likely to be a problem only if the user (1) takes prescription ACE inhibitors for high blood pressure or (2) eats large amounts of celery or celeriac or takes St. John's wort. Sunburn can be avoided by avoidance of midday sun or by use of sun block.

Botanical: *Xanthoxylum Americanum* (MILL.)

Family: N.O. Rutacea

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---**Synonyms**---Toothache Tree. Yellow Wood. Suterberry.

---**Parts Used**---Root-bark, berries.

---**Description**---The Prickly Ash (*Xanthoxylum Americanum*, Mill., *X. fraxineum* Willd.; *X. Carolinianum*, Lamb.) is a small North American tree growing in the open air in this country. It has pinnate leaves and alternate branches, which are covered with sharp and strong prickles: the common footstalk is also sometimes prickly, and also the bark.

It belongs to the Yellow Wood family (*Rutaceae*), which all possess aromatic and pungent properties. The berries, growing in clusters on the top of the branches, are black or deep blue and enclosed in a

grey shell.

The leaves and berries have an aromatic odour similar to that of oil of Lemons, and the berries and bark have a hot, acrid taste.

The *root-bark* and *berries* are used medicinally, being official in the United States Pharmacopoeia.

---**Constituents**---The barks of numerous species of *Xanthoxylum* and the allied genus *Fagara* have been used medicinally. There are two principal varieties of Prickly Ash in commerce: *X. Americanum* (Northern Prickly Ash) and *Fagara Clava-Herculis* (Southern Prickly Ash), which is supposed to be more active. Although not absolutely identical, the two Prickly Ash barks are very similar in their active constituents. Both contain small amounts of volatile oil, fat, sugar, gum, acrid resin, a bitter alkaloid, believed to be Berberine and a colourless, tasteless, inert, crystalline body, *Xanthoxylin*, slightly different in the two barks. Both yield a large amount of Ash: 12 per cent. or more. The name *Xanthoxylin* is also applied to a resinous extractive prepared by pouring a tincture of the drug into water.

The fruits of both the species are used similarly to the barks. Their constituents have not been investigated, but they apparently agree in a general way with those of the bark.

The drug is practically never adulterated. The Northern bark occurs in commerce in curved or quilled fragments about 1/24 inch thick, externally brownish grey, with whitish patches, faintly furrowed, with some linear-based, two-edged spines about 1/4 inch long. The fracture is short, green in the outer, and yellow in the inner part. The Southern bark, which is more frequently sold, is 1/12 inch thick and has conical, corky spines, sometimes 4/5, inch in height.

Xanthoxylin is included in the United States Pharmacopoeia for the preparation of a fluid extract, the dose of which is 1/2 to 1 drachm.

---**Medicinal Action and Uses**---It acts as a stimulant - resembling guaiacum resin and mezereon bark in its remedial action and is greatly recommended in the United States for chronic rheumatism, typhoid and skin diseases and impurity of the blood, administered either in the form of fluid extract or in doses of 10 grains to 1/2 drachm in the powdered form, three times daily.

The following formula has also become popular in herbal medicine: Take 1/2 oz. each of Prickly Ash Bark, Guaiacum Raspings and Buckbean Herb, with 6 Cayenne Pods. Boil in 1 1/2 pint of water down to 1 pint. Dose: a wineglassful three or four times daily.

On account of the energetic stimulant properties of the bark, it produces when swallowed a sense of heat in the stomach, with more or less general arterial excitement and tendency to perspiration and is a useful tonic in debilitated conditions of the stomach and digestive organs, and is used in colic, cramp and colera, in fever, ague, lethargy, for cold hands and feet and complaints arising from a bad circulation.

A decoction made by boiling an ounce in 3 pints of water down to a quarter may be given in the quantity of a pint, in divided doses, during the twenty-four hours. As a counter-irritant, the decoction may be applied on compresses. It has also been used as an emmenagogue.

The powdered bark forms an excellent application to indolent ulcers and old wounds for cleansing, stimulating, drying up and healing the wounds. The pulverized bark is also used for paralytic affections and nervous headaches and as a topical irritant the bark, either in powdered form, or chewed, has been a very popular remedy for toothache in America, hence the origin of a common name of the tree in the States: Toothache Tree.

The berries are considered even more active than the bark, being carminative and antispasmodic, and are used as an aperient and for dyspepsia and indigestion; a fluid extract of the berries being given, in doses of 10 to 30 drops.

Xanthoxylon. Dose, 1 to 2 grains.

Both berries and bark are used to make a good bitter.

The name Prickly Ash has also been given to *Aralia spinosa* (Linn.), the Prickly Elder, or Angelica Tree, the bark, roots and berries of which are used as alteratives.

See [ANGELICA TREE](#).