

Lemongrass

Native to Southeast Asia, lemongrass can also be found growing in India, South America, Africa, Australia, and the United States. Famous by now in the west for its use in culinary delights from such countries as Thailand and Vietnam it also has a rich history in the folk medicine tradition of Asia. One of its many botanic aliases is "fever grass" which is a reference to its use in febrile conditions. Drunk hot in a strong infusion, it was often found to be useful in fevers that resulted from infections and upper respiratory conditions.

Much of its action is today attributed to its high content of essential oils, which are responsible for its characteristic scent. This essential oil is strongly anti-bacterial, especially when used in its concentrated and pure form. For this reason, it is important not to boil lemongrass if seeking to use it medicinally, as much of its therapeutic benefit will be lost in the steam that escapes. An exception to this rule of thumb, is when using lemongrass to treat sinus infections when it is appropriate to quickly bring the lemongrass to the boil and then inhale the steam whilst underneath a sheet or towel. This very same technique can be used to help clear blemishes from the skin by providing a medicated steam bath that will simultaneously open the pores and remove bacteria.

Other external applications can be made by soaking hand towels in a strong infusion of fresh lemongrass and then applying them whilst hot to aching or arthritic joints. To produce an even more potent combination fresh ginger can be added, and the hot towels changed regularly for up to an hour. Some aromatherapists recommend using lemongrass in the treatment of sprains and tendon injuries. This can also be achieved by wrapping the affected area in towels soaked in an infusion of either hot or cold lemongrass tea.

In larger amounts lemongrass can also be used for skin complaints, local infections or scalp disorders. Traditionally it was used for ring worms and as a general body wash, disinfectant and perfume.

Consumed internally it is a wonderful prophylactic for winter colds and flus, and may even help cheer away a mild case of the winter blues. If an infection has already set in, then regular doses of lemongrass tea is often all that is needed. If a sore throat arises, add honey, if a virus is suspected, combine with fresh turmeric, if a good old fashion chill has come on, then drink with fresh ginger, but either way, lemongrass is a wonderful all round immune tonic.

A final area that lemongrass has been used in the east is as a digestive aid. In this regard it may help those with an overburdened liver from excessive consumption of rich fatty foods and alcohol. It is also of use for those who suffer from flatulence and dyspepsia after eating, in which case it is best drunk hot before each meal.

It is not difficult to see why the plant was so well regarded by those who cultivated it in the past, and as with many foods, is underutilised as a cheaply available medicine in today's high tech environment. As with all plants however, if you want the best in flavour and nutritional effects, ALWAYS buy organic.

- The Barefoot Doctor