

Schisandra – China's Most Potent Medicinal Berry

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Grown primarily in China's Upper Yangtze region, the small, red schisandra berry has been used for centuries in traditional Chinese medicine and is becoming well-known worldwide for its many health benefits
- › Clinical studies show schisandra berries may be useful for improving cognitive function, enhancing libido, reducing stress, enhancing athletic performance, improving heart function and possibly fighting cancer
- › Researchers showed villagers how future schisandra berry yields depended on harvesting only the bottom two-thirds of the vines so birds and other wildlife could continue "seeding" the mountain forests
- › Several entities worked together to create the FairWild Standard, a verification system to improve environmental conditions and labor practices, possibly saving the schisandra berry and other rare, wild plants used for food and medicine

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While it may sound like a fantasy planet or a prescription drug, schisandra (*Schisandra chinensis*) is neither, but it may end up affecting the reliance some have on medications. That's because schisandra, a berry that grows on woody, climbing vines in the cool subtropical forests of China's Upper Yangtze region and parts of Russia, is a bona fide superfood.

Known as a traditional curative for chronic coughs, incontinence, night sweats and insomnia for 2,000 years, the berry is gaining attention. Modern-day restaurants in China offer alcohol with a base of saturated schisandra berries, which patrons top up from tall glass containers, like lemonade at an American picnic.

But the flavor is not for the faint of heart. Amazingly, schisandra berries (sometimes spelled with a "z") feature all five of the taste senses at once, each denoting its own medicinal application, which experts at Learning Herbs¹ say can be determined by the flavor:

- **Sweet** – Sweet herbs can help restore energy and balance your immune system.
- **Salty** – High in minerals, an example of a salty herb is [nettle](#), which is used for its nourishing and diuretic effects.
- **Sour** – A perfect model for the sour taste, [lemon water](#) helps promote digestion and build strength and stamina.
- **Bitter** – As herbs, "bitters" are used to help stimulate digestion, modulate inflammation by exerting a cooling, draining effect on your body, akin to drinking coffee.
- **Pungent** – This taste is warming and spicy, awakening your senses; cayenne is a good example.

Schisandra berry is also called "five-flavored berry," or Wu Wei Zi. It's mainly used for medicinal applications, even though it's also been used as a base for everything from jams to juice. But as the Medicine Hunter² notes, unlike [goji](#) or [acai berries](#), "Nobody eats this stuff with yogurt."

A Berry With Mental and Physical Benefits

Therapeutically speaking, the schisandra berry is especially revered in Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) because of its astounding health benefits. However, it first gained recognition in Russia in the 1960s, after 20 years of studies helped place it in the National Pharmacopoeia of the USSR and in the State Register of Drugs.

Its initial notoriety was as an **adaptogen**, which the Global Healing Center³ describes as a natural substance that helps your body adapt to stress. A Swedish study reports:⁴

"Pharmacological studies on animals have shown that Schizandra [sic] increases physical working capacity and affords a stress-protective effect against a broad spectrum of harmful factors including heat shock, skin burn, cooling, frostbite, immobilization, swimming under load in an atmosphere with decreased air pressure, aseptic inflammation, irradiation and heavy metal intoxication.

The phytoadaptogen exerts an effect on the central nervous, sympathetic, endocrine, immune, respiratory, cardiovascular, gastrointestinal systems, on the development of experimental atherosclerosis, on blood sugar and acid-base balance, and on uterus myotonic (atrophying) activity."

Medicine Hunter⁵ lists several of the physical and mental effects provided by the schisandra berry, as studies have indicated:

Slow signs of aging	Increase energy	Enhance athletic performance
Prevent mental fatigue	Reduce stress	Enhance your libido
Promote endurance	Improve concentration	Improve mental health
Maintain healthy cells	Sharpen memory	Prolong life

Learning Herbs⁶ cites studies that indicate the schisandra berry also helps promote sleep, **relieve anxiety**, ease digestive troubles such as chronic diarrhea and support your immune system, even in cases of severe hepatitis B.

Illnesses and Conditions Improved by Schisandra Berries

The list of diseases, disorders and conditions this little red berry is said to help treat successfully is truly remarkable. Many of them are based on its potency as an antioxidant, including:

- **Cancer protection** – The International Journal of Molecular Medicine published a study⁷ that revealed schisandrin C, a phytochemical found in schisandra berries, as a "promising" anticancer agent, as it inhibited human leukemia cell growth.
- **Improved heart function** – While the drug adriamycin is used to stop breast cancer cell proliferation, it can cause cardiotoxicity, decreased heart function, abnormal accumulation of fluid in the abdominal cavity and congested liver.

The active ingredients in schisandra berry, however, reportedly have beneficial effects on cardiotoxicity in rats due to free radicals, which are unstable molecules that can damage healthy cells. It also helped inhibit lipid peroxidation and reduced mortality in rats.⁸

- **Helps lower the risk for liver damage** – A study⁹ in the journal Food and Chemical Toxicology noted that Schisandra chinensis protects against liver injury from the cancer-causing agent [carbon tetrachloride](#).

Mice were treated with carbon tetrachloride to induce liver injury, then treated with a schisandra pollen extract. Results showed elevated antioxidant activity, inhibiting increased liver enzymes (higher levels of liver enzymes indicate liver disease) and lowered free radical formation in the animals' livers.

- **Anti-inflammatory advantages** – One study¹⁰ indicated that adding schisandra berries to your diet may protect you from inflammation and that supplementation may be useful for preventing inflammatory diseases.

The attention on the plant that produces tiny, bright red berries represents more than just its medicinal importance. The schisandra berry's home is known as one of the most biodiverse areas on the planet, which is now undergoing a "dramatic new approach to conservation," according to the Food and Environment Reporting Network (FERN).¹¹

How to Save an Ecosystem and the 'Gatherers' Who Serve the World

Not so long ago, a sad ending for the schisandra vine looked imminent. In China, portions of farmland are allotted to families. In the Upper Yangtze, farmers began pooling their resources to grow crops on the mountain slopes to sell for extra cash. As forests were logged out to make way for more farmlands, mudslides began decimating the mountains and forests, destroying many of the rare medicinal plants.

Commercial harvest of magnolia bulbs (used for inflammation, anxiety, stroke and asthma¹²), and angelica roots (aka **dong quai**, popular as an aphrodisiac and a balancing agent for hormones¹³), were destroyed, as well as the fragile habitat for the endangered giant panda.

Eventually, the 1990s brought government bans on hillside timber harvest, and then on farm operation on the mountain slopes in an initiative they called "Grain for Green," but it backfired. The problem escalated rather than being resolved, according to FERN:¹⁴

"It was salvation for the forests, but the farmers had to scramble to replace the lost income. Families started gathering more wild plants than ever, ripping entire schisandra vines from trees to get as many berries as possible. This not only killed the plants, but also spread the foragers' human scent, scaring panda mothers who then abandoned their babies."

It looked like the end of the story for the schisandra berry, and a new period of trouble for the villagers, until Josef Brinckmann, an ethnobotanist and research fellow in medicinal plants at Traditional Medicinals tea company, arrived in 2008. His remedy for the situation was to encourage **wild harvest**, not prohibit it.

Wild Plant Gathering – A New Chapter for Schisandra Berries

According to a report from Kew Gardens' State of the World's Plants, two-fifth of the world's plant species is facing threats of extinction.¹⁵ As Brinckmann put it, "The biggest

threat to biodiversity is farming and development, not over-harvesting wild plants."

Brinckmann was on a team that included members of the World Wildlife Federation and the Swiss and German governments in the creation of the FairWild Standard, the first verification system in the native plant industry to focus on improving both environmental conditions and labor practices.

FairWild's investment in overseeing sustainable practices of the Upper Yangtze villagers impacted whole communities and possibly saved not only schisandra berry but other natural, plant-based foods and medicines as well. As a result, FERN continues:

"Around the world, 19 plant species in 10 countries are now certified under FairWild, and at least 1,000 households in Central Europe and Asia are involved. That amounts to about 300 tons of plant material each year, with Roma collectors in Hungary and Bosnia filling sacks with rose hips and nettles, while families in Kazakhstan dig for licorice roots."¹⁶

Something else occurred that turned villagers' receding incomes into a national crisis — a massive earthquake that hit the Upper Yangtze in 2008 and not only killed 69,000 people but left nearly 5 million homeless. At that point, harvesting wild plants became a national priority.

How Schisandra Berry Harvest Practices Became 'Sustainable'

Rather than tearing out every schisandra berry vine they could find, Brinckmann and fellow researchers explained to villagers how imperative it was for future yields to harvest only the bottom two-thirds of the vines so that birds and other wildlife could continue "seeding" the mountain forests.

At the same time, collectors also learned that giant panda breeding areas should be avoided. After a 17% rise in the panda population, experts cheerfully reported their effort "seems to be working," as the beloved animal's status moved upward from "endangered" to "threatened."

Indigenous groups around the world are still being trained under FairWild in sustainable harvesting techniques. As contractors, they're now able to sell their products for what they're worth. Further, villagers are compensated for protecting the land – and as keepers of the local, botanical expertise, that's often as ancient as their native cultures.

Some of the contractors are elderly, as well as women and children who would struggle to survive otherwise, and they take responsibility for many rare plants that around 80% of the world relies on for food and medicine.

The schisandra berry project alone is now a cooperative between 23 villages, involving buyer contracts that give families a 30% profit above market rate. Additionally, when one wants to add new plants to the FairWild list, they're responsible for designing not only a plan to manage its harvest, but also the entire microecosystem in which it grows.

Schisandra Berry Supplementation

From all the above information, it's easy to see why these little berries are becoming so well-known in the West and so desirable as a supplement. As Medicine Hunter notes:¹⁷

"You can find schisandra in a couple of forms. In Chinese groceries and medicine shops, you can find dried schisandra berries. Just a few dried berries daily will impart the benefits described there. Or, you can also find schisandra supplements. Look for ones that are standardized to the schisandrins, which are active compounds."

Sources and References

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