

Devil's Club: Pacific Northwest's Potent Weapon By Dr. Reese Halter

Many plants throughout the Pacific Northwest have exquisite compounds to ward off fungal and bacterial infections. There may be none stronger than devil's club.

Devil's club is a native and a rather prehistoric looking single-stemmed plant covered head-to-toe in armor with three quarters of an inch (2 centimeter) spines on its stem, leaf base and leaves. Its spine will cause severe skin irritation. It can grow 20 feet (6 meters) high with 14 inch (35 centimeter) leaves resembling a big leaf maple. It has small whitish flowers and reproduces from bright red berries or root layering, which is a natural form of clonal propagation.

Devil's club occurs throughout the Pacific Northwest on moist, but well drained, rich forested ecosystems. It's a member of the same family as Asian and Siberian ginseng, but does not contain similar ginsenosides or the active compounds as its cousins do. Devil's club does, however, have potent properties to successfully fight antifungal, antiviral, antibacterial and antimycobacterial agents. That's why it is being tested to combat *Esherichia coli*, *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Bacillius subtilis*.

The First Peoples of the Pacific Northwest have known about these and other properties for thousands of years. They revere this plant, and for good reason, for both medicinal and spiritual applications. In fact, they use it to treat 34 different physical ailments including broken bones, type II diabetes and cancers. The inner stem bark is most commonly used by First Peoples. Whole stems, berries, leaves and roots contain active compounds to boost the human immune system.

First Peoples believe that devil's club protects them against supernatural entities, epidemics and evil influences. During certain ceremonies the extract of the red berries is painted on shaman's faces. It is said to give them supernatural powers.

Devil's club has been illegally marketed as Alaskan ginseng. Commercially available tinctures, teas and capsules that contain devil's club extract are harvested from roots. Some producers unfortunately are trying to take advantage of false ginseng properties which only come from roots.

Devil's club is harvested from wild plants. It is difficult to cultivate and presently there are no commercial cultivations producing the plant. Harvesting roots from wild stock for commercial use kills plants and is not sustainable.

Currently devil's club is being tested for treatment of tuberculosis and AIDS. Its many medicinal properties make it an exciting plant which potentially will

offer hope to those afflicted with dreadful diseases.

In light of the anticipated benefits, land managers must be careful not to over-harvest this plant. Pacific Northwest First Peoples should be consulted on the cultural significance, ethical harvesting methods, applications, and on active pharmacological compounds of this plant.

Wild forests are made up of intricate and intimate webs of life, and devil's club is proof that our diverse temperate forests contain more than just big, old trees.

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