

Psychotria ipecacuanha

[Synonyms : *Callicocca ipecacuanha*, *Cephaelis granatensis*, *Cephaelis ipecacuanha*, *Euphorbia ipecacuanha*, *Evea ipecacuanha*, *Uragoga ipecacuanha*]

IPECACUANHA (English, Swedish) is a trailing shrub. Native to Brazil it has white flowers. It is also known as American ipecac, American white ipecac, Black spurge, Brazilian ipecacuanha, *Brechwurz* (German), Carolina hippo, Carolina ipecac, Carolina ipecacuanha, Ipecac, Ipecac spurge, Ipecacuaha spurge, Matto grosso ipecac, *Oksetusjuuri* (Finnish), *Raicilla* (Spanish), Rio ipecacuanha, Spurge ipecac, White ipecac, White ipecacuanha, and Wild ipecacuanha.

The roots yield a valuable drug.

Warning – must be used only by a qualified practitioner. Large doses can be dangerous. It can cause vomiting, diarrhoea, severe bronchitis, pulmonary inflammation, dilation of blood vessels and cardiac failure. Powdered root can irritate the skin and also cause violent sneezing and coughing.

Ipecacuanha is a corruption of a term *i-pe-kaa-guen-e* (road-side sick-making plant) used by the Guarani Indians of Brazil and Paraguay who were the first to identify its medicinal qualities.

The shrub eventually reached some of the North American Indian tribes, and the Cherokee used it not only to cause vomiting (when this was medically beneficial) but also to treat some lung problems and stem internal bleeding.

Although ipecacuanha is said to have been found in the late 16th Century in Brazil by a Portuguese priest, Manoel Tristaon, and later arrived in Europe in 1672 with a traveller named Legros (who brought some root with him to Paris from South America) ipecacuanha's botanical source invited much argument for some while. According to some records it was not until 1800 that the plant was formally identified from authentic specimens brought from Brazil to Lisbon by a physician in the Portuguese Navy named Gomez.

In 1680 Jean Adrien Helvetius (1661-1727), a Parisian doctor, learnt from a merchant in Paris (called Garnier) that this new plant, ipecacuanha, could be helpful in curing dysentery. He decided to try it on patients and formulated the basis of a patent medicine for which trials were carried out. Helvetius then received the sole right to sell this medicine from Louis XIV (1638-1715) who had already been cured of dysentery with ipecacuanha. But a few years later the French Government bought the formula from him for 1,000 louis d'or and in 1688 made it generally available to the public. However it was not until 1816 that the medical fraternity began to understand the reason for the dramatic cures. In that year the celebrated French professor (and ultimately director) of the School of Pharmacy in Paris, Pierre Pelletier (1788-1842) who incidentally was responsible for the naming of chlorophyll, isolated the responsible drugs particularly present in these roots.

The importance and efficacy of the drug obtained from this plant is accentuated by the fact that it is still included in every national pharmacopoeia, except that of China. It is used primarily in treating bronchitis, whooping-cough, croup, coughs generally and amoebic (or tropical) dysentery. It is also used as a standard emetic for children who have taken poisonous substances or an overdose of medicines. Medical research at the end of the 20th

Century indicates that it could also be useful in the treatment of some forms of cancer. The pharmaceutical industry uses ipecacuanha today to prepare cough and other proprietary medicines.