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Smilax aristolochiaefolia

[Synonyms : *Smilax aristolochiifolia*, *Smilax kerberi*, *Smilax medica*, *Smilax medica* var. *bracteata*, *Smilax milleri*, *Smilax ornata*]

SARSAPARILLA is an evergreen vine. Native to Middle America (particularly Costa Rica) it has small greenish to white flowers.

It is also known as American sarsaparilla, Costa Rican sarsaparilla, Grey sarsaparilla, Honduran sarsaparilla, Jamaican sarsaparilla, Mexican sarsaparilla, Red-bearded sarsaparilla, Red sarsaparilla, *Salsapariglia* (Italian), *Salsepareille* (French), *Sarsaparille* (German), Spanish sarsaparilla, True sarsaparilla, Vera Cruz sarsaparilla, and *Zarzaparilla* (Spanish).

Aristolochiaefolia is derived from the genus name *Aristolochia* and Latin *-folia* (leaved) components meaning ‘with leaves like those of that genus’.

The name Sarsaparilla is said to be derived from Spanish words *sarza* and *parilla* (meaning respectively ‘bramble’ and ‘vine’) with reference to its prickliness.

Introduced to Europe by the Spanish in 1563 as a possible cure for syphilis (which eventually was proven to be ineffective) the root was imported in great quantities from the West Indies, and Middle and South America (Brazil especially). In the 19th Century the British Pharmacopoeia only permitted the use of Jamaica Sarsaparilla (which had actually been collected in Middle America) for the treatment of various ailments in particular asthma, rheumatism and some skin diseases which it was believed by then would benefit from it – although root from other sources continued to be acceptable in other European countries.

The plant is used as a flavouring in soft drinks particularly in the Caribbean.

Medicinally, today sarsaparilla is little used apart from a following in folk medicine and pharmaceutically as a vehicle and flavouring for medicines, although Chinese medicine continues to treat the traditional ailments associated with it with other closely related species.