



## Herbs of Love

Seeing as she was the Greek goddess of beauty and love, Cupid's mom, Aphrodite, was impossible to resist, especially when she wore her girdle made of gold, with magic woven into its filigree. Down through the ages, gods and mortals alike have celebrated an odd assortment of foods, flora, fauna, talismans, and other novelties for their power to set off sexual fireworks. In today's anything-goes world, all it takes is a doctor's prescription to ignite someone's fuse. But if ingesting chemicals isn't your cup of tea, and girdles of gold are out of your price range, why not go the natural, back-to-earth route? Even though scientists in their lab coats have traditionally dissed plant-based aphrodisiacs as sexually worthless, old beliefs die hard, particularly when they promise—and deliver—great sex. But things are definitely looking up. From an Amazon shrub to the bark of a West African tree, new research shows that a surprising number of herbal aphrodisiacs really do stimulate more than just the imagination. Here then—in time for February 14—are natural aphrodisiacs that may make this Valentine's Day, if not the rest of the year, seem more like the Fourth of July.

### **Damiana the Torpedos, Full Speed Ahead**

When early botanists cataloged the flora of today's U.S.-Mexican border, the local women admitted sheepishly that they primed themselves for sex by drinking damiana-leaf tea. They also said that this herb produces erotic dreams if you drink the tea at bedtime. Impressed, the botanists called the plant *Turnera aphrodisiaca*. With a name like that, you'd think this plant would have attracted considerable research interest. Oddly, very few studies have investigated it. But one animal study in Italy showed that damiana "improves the copulatory performance of sexually sluggish or impotent rats. These results seem to support damiana's folk reputation as a sex stimulant."

There are a number of damiana products available (see Sidebar 3, "Where to Buy," at the end of this article). If you have bulk damiana leaves, try this recipe recommended by Cynthia Watson, M.D., author of *Love Potions*: Soak 1 ounce dried damiana leaves in 1 pint vodka for five days. Strain through a coffee filter; store vodka in a cool place. Soak the damiana leaves in 1/4 pint spring water for five more days. Strain through a coffee filter. Discard the leaves. Heat the water enough to dissolve 3/4 cup honey. Allow the water to cool, then mix with the vodka; store in a glass bottle. Drink one or two cordial glasses before sex. "I have personally observed amatory effects," Watson has been quoted as saying. "Highly recommended."

### **Desire Under the Ginkgo**

Taken from the leaves of ginkgo trees, Ginkgo biloba extract has shown promise in the treatment of various circulatory disorders, which may include the improvement of brain functioning and slowing the progression of Alzheimer's disease. Ginkgo also boosts blood flow into the genitals. At the University of California, San Francisco, researchers gave ginkgo (209 mg/day) to 63 men and women who were taking antidepressants and suffering their sexual side effects: libido loss, erectile dysfunction, loss of vaginal lubrication, and loss of orgasm. The herb helped 76 percent of the men and 91 percent of the women.

### **Is That a Ginseng Root in Your Pocket?**

No wonder ginseng is called the king of herbs, seeing as it lays claim to everything from longevity to lowering cholesterol to making men more virile. After Korean researchers gave 45 men with erection problems either a placebo or the herb three times a day for eight weeks, the ginseng group experienced significant erection improvement. So far, few studies have been reported on ginseng's aphrodisiacal effect on women. Ginseng must be used regularly for several months before its benefits become noticeable. Be aware, though, that ginseng and ginkgo are anticoagulants. If you take blood-thinning medication or use other anticoagulants frequently, such as aspirin, garlic, or vitamin E, you may experience bruising or bleeding problems. It may also raise blood pressure. Be sure to consult a physician before using ginseng.

### **You Maca me Feel Like a Natural Woman**

Maca is an Andean ground cover that grows at elevations over 13,000 feet. As far back as the Incas, Andean inhabitants have believed its tubers boost strength, libido, and fertility. When early Spanish colonists to the area complained that their livestock did not reproduce well, the locals suggested feeding the animals maca. The benefits were so dramatic that colonial historians extolled maca as a fertility enhancer. But it took several hundred years for the plant to be studied scientifically. Recently, Chinese researchers treated male rats with either a placebo or maca extract for 22 days and then placed each one with five sexually receptive females. Compared with females mated with control rats, those mated with maca-treated animals were more than twice as likely to contain sperm, suggesting that the herb does, indeed, have sex- and fertility-stimulating effects. Other studies have shown that maca increases animal sperm counts. It's not just for males (rats or men): The Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine found maca to be useful in increasing sexual arousal in women. Although no human studies of maca's alleged sex-enhancing benefits have been published, that hasn't stopped herb and supplement companies from marketing maca products that claim to enhance sex. If you want to try maca, it appears to be safe.

### **Muir of a Good Thing**

With a long history of use as an aphrodisiac, Muira puama—traditionally known as "potency wood"—is the bark of an Amazon shrub. People indigenous to the Amazon drink muira puama tea and also rub it onto their genitals. French researchers surveyed the sexuality of 262 healthy women complaining of low libido, then gave them a combination of muira puama and ginkgo. Sixty-two percent reported improved sexual function: greater libido, more frequent intercourse, increased likelihood of orgasm, more-intense orgasms, and greater sexual satisfaction. Boil two tablespoons of powdered muira puama bark in a pint of water for 15 minutes, and drink (hot or cold) before bedtime.

## **Barking up the Right Tree**

For centuries, the bark of the West African yohimbe tree was reputed to restore faltering erections. Scientists scoffed—until the 1980s, when several studies showed that a chemical in the bark, yohimbine, increases blood flow into the penis. Years before Viagra, the Food and Drug Administration approved yohimbine as a prescription treatment for erection problems. The herbal extract is available in several drugs, including Yocon and Yohimex.

Yohimbine may also boost women's sexual arousal. University of Texas researchers gave 25 women complaining of sexual-arousal difficulties either a placebo or a combination of yohimbine and L-arginine, an amino acid crucial to the synthesis of nitric oxide, which is key to sexual responsiveness. The women then viewed erotic videos. Compared with those taking the placebo, the women who took the yohimbine and L-arginine treatment reported greater arousal.

According to an analysis by FDA chemists, many OTC products contain only trace amounts of yohimbine. Buy from reputable makers or consider asking your doctor for a prescription. ?

## **Castleman's Picks**

In the course of researching my new book, *Great Sex*, I found the following two herbal aphrodisiacs to be the best supported by research:

¶ **ArginMax.** Now widely available at supplement shops and natural-food stores, ArginMax is actually two slightly different products, one for men, the other for women. It's the brainchild of Hank Wuh, M.D., author of *Sexual Fitness*.

ArginMax for Women is a multivitamin that also contains ginseng, ginkgo, damiana, and the sex-critical amino acid L-arginine. In a small Stanford study, researchers found that ArginMax increased libido, frequency of lovemaking, and sexual satisfaction.

ArginMax for Men is similar, except that instead of damiana it contains zinc, which is important to men's reproductive health.

¶ **Zestra.** Zestra is a genital massage oil for women that increases blood flow into the clitoris and vulva. Its ingredients include borage-seed oil, evening-primrose oil, angelica extract, coleus extract, and vitamin E as a preservative. The results of one small study showed Zestra to significantly increase arousal, sensation, pleasure, and orgasm.

To obtain Zestra, call 877-493-7872 or visit [zestra-women.com](http://zestra-women.com).

**By Michael Castleman**