



## In Geoff's Words...

### Anecdotal Medicine is Best!

Science has not had time to rigorously test every botanical for every traditional use, and I used to think that was bad. Now I think "Hey, science, take your time. I'm willing to accept some uncertainty." Why did I change my mind? Why do I now embrace traditional uses, which may or may not be accurate?

For instance traditional uses for **butterbur** (*Petasites vulgaris*) include a heart stimulant, diuretic, fever remedy, ulcer remedy, poison antidote, and love divination. Love divination? Apparently if a young, unmarried woman sows butterbur seeds half an hour before sunrise on a Friday morning, in a lonesome place and sings "I sow, I sow! / Then, my own dear, / Come here, come here, / And mow and mow!", she will see her future husband mowing a short distance away.<sup>1</sup> Of all these traditional uses, which ones have been scientifically proven? None that I know of, but other surprising uses have. Several scientific studies find butterbur (*Petasites hybridus* root) to be effective at preventing migraine headaches in adults, adolescents, and children. In adults, for example, 150 mg of a standardized extract per day reduced the number of migraines per month for most participants by half or more. This is significantly better than the placebo used, and comparable to observed benefits from prescription medications. It should be noted that although the frequency lessened, the duration and intensity of the migraine appeared unchanged.<sup>2</sup> In another clinical trial a carbon dioxide extract of butterbur was found to be as effective as fexofenadine (Allegra®) for allergic rhinitis (hay fever).<sup>3</sup>

It looks like science has given migraine and hay fever sufferers a safer, cheaper remedy that's just as effective as conventional drugs. If butterbur becomes popular, you can bet there will be many more studies.

**Ginkgo** (*Ginkgo biloba*) is one of the top three dietary supplements sold (the other two are garlic and glucosamine) so ginkgo is one of the most studied botanicals with an estimated 140+ published clinical trials involving both healthy adults and adults suffering from dementia and other cognitive impairment. What do they tell us?

According to a review of scientific literature through September 2004, 11 out of 16 studies involving healthy, cognitively intact adults found significant positive results including enhanced performances involving memory, attention, and

speed of processing abilities.<sup>4</sup> But ginkgo did not benefit from the weight of all these positive studies because recently the media focused on one of the clinical trials<sup>5</sup> that did not find significant positive results and generally reported that ginkgo did not work! Thanks, science.

What if a dietary supplement had a great and important benefit which was scientifically proven with little dispute, and the media had nothing bad to say about it. Would that get everyone excited?

**Red yeast rice** is rice that has been fermented by red yeast (*Monascus purpureus*). Chinese peoples have been eating it for over one thousand years without reports of toxicity. One traditional use was for improving blood circulation. Science had little difficulty validating that claim because the red yeast makes monacolin K, also known as lovastatin, marketed as Mevacor™, a studied and approved drug that lowers cholesterol.<sup>6</sup> With science on its side, Pharmanex, Inc. fermented selected strains of red yeast that would produce a concentration of lovastatin and marketed it as the dietary supplement Cholestin, claiming, correctly, that it will help reduce cholesterol. After much litigation the FDA successfully got Cholestin reclassified as a drug, which destroyed its biggest assets: cheap, safe availability.

Science starts off helping the dietary supplement industry by validating uses for botanicals, then kills it because negative studies get media attention and positive studies get FDA attention (to be fair, neither of these is the fault of science). Is the answer to shun studies and go back to traditional uses before science robs us of them? When my daughter grows up and is ready to settle down should I give her some butterbur seeds to sow?

The answer is "yes" to everything. Yes, science, keep studying. Yes, health-conscience consumer, subscribe to HerbalGram, the peer-reviewed Journal of the American Botanical Council to find out the latest scientifically accurate information.<sup>7</sup> Yes, pass on the information to your family and friends as humans have traditionally done (don't tell the popular media). And yes, rely on unstudied traditional uses, too. For example, I'm 100% convinced butterbur seeds can get my daughter a date. After all, if you put a young, unmarried, lonely woman singing all alone in a field at harvest time just before the weekend, she won't fail to attract muscular, employable suitors!

<sup>4</sup> Crews, W. David, Jr., et. al. The Neuropsychological Efficacy of Ginkgo Preparations in Healthy and Cognitively Intact Adults, *HerbalGram* 67:2005, p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> Solomon PR, et. al. Ginkgo for memory enhancement, *JAMA*, 2002; 288(7), p. 835.

<sup>6</sup> Lee, Dennis, MD. Red Yeast Rice and Cholesterol – A critical review. [www.medicinenet.com](http://www.medicinenet.com), article 14999 viewed Mar. 2006.

<sup>7</sup> [www.herbalgram.org](http://www.herbalgram.org) or send \$50 for membership and one year of HerbalGram to American Botanical Council, 6200 Manor Rd, Austin, TX 78723, or call (512) 926-4900.

<sup>1</sup> Grieve, Mrs. M., *A Modern Herbal, Vol 1.*, Dover Publications, Inc., 1971, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> Research reviews, *HerbalGram*, 67:2005, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Schapowal, A. Treating Intermittent Allergic Rhinitis: A Prospective, Randomized, Placebo and Antihistamine-controlled Study of butterbur Extract Ze 339. *Phytotherapy Research* 2005;19(6), p. 530.