

Herbs for Natural Energy & Vitality

The Amazing Adaptogens ~

By Rosemary Gladstar

Adaptogens...this word has become the recent buzz word in herbalism and herbs classified as adaptogens are the new super stars of the herbal world. And for good reason. Adaptogenic herbs boost energy, restore vitality, and help raise the body's ability to deal with the stresses of modern life with no harmful side effects. They are also the prime herbs used for increasing life force and longevity. Broadly speaking an Adaptogen can be any substance or life style change that helps one adjust or adapt to our modern day environment, but the term is most often used to describe a group of herbs that have a long history of promoting longevity and increasing the overall strength and resiliency of our bodies.

The term, adaptogen, is fairly new and won't be found in any of the older herbals, i.e. those written before 1980, or even a dictionary, yet is a common term amongst herbalists and wholistic practitioners and is used to describe a highly regarded and well known group of herbs. Coined by a Russian scientist, Dr. Lazarev in the late 1940's, adaptogen was used to describe any substance that: (a) had a normalizing effect on our system without harmful side effects and (b) worked by a 'non specific' action to increase resistance to illness through a wide range of physical and biochemical factors. Dr. Lazarev's student, Dr. Brekhman, a holistically minded scientist with an interest in nature and plants, furthered Lazarev's work by researching herbs that a history of 'adaptogenic' like qualities. He focused his work primarily on *Eleutherococcus senticosus* (Siberian Ginseng) and *Panax ginseng* (Asian varieties of ginseng) and conducted thousands of studies that proved that these herbs had the unique ability to help the body adapt to the stresses of modern life and increase adaptability to our environment.

Though the term adaptogen may be new, the knowledge of herbs with 'adaptogenic' qualities, i.e. those herbs used to promote and enhance longevity, have been around for generations. In Traditional Chinese herbalism, these herbs were termed "Superior Medicine" and were among the most widely used of the Chinese herbs. Superior Medicines, like adaptogens, were safe and non toxic, increased resistance to illness, and were used to promote health and longevity. In India, herbs with the ability to restore and enhance life force were referred to as Rajsana herbs and an entire 'science of life' evolved around them. In Western or American Herbalism, these herbs were classified as Herbal Tonics and used to treat a wide range of imbalances as well as to increase longevity. Though there is lively discussion among herbalists about the differences between Adaptogens and Tonics, I find there are more similarities than differences. These herbs work non-specifically in the body, often with an 'either or' or amphoteric like action; they have normalizing and restorative effects; and are non harmful even when used over a long period time.; and these herbs increase and build vitality from a cellular level up.

No matter what they're called, Superior Medicines, Herbal Tonics, Rajsana's, Longevity herbs or Adaptogenics, these are among our most well known herbs and well suited for

the stresses of modern day life! Traditionally, these herbs were often incorporated into one's meals, cooked into soups, sprinkled into food, or made into syrups, tonic drinks, and delicious spreads that were enticing to eat. Of course, one can take them as capsules and tinctures as well ~ there are many fine adaptogenic and longevity formulas available ~ but most herbalists prefer to use these particular herbs as food rather than 'medicine'.

Adaptogens: A term coined in 1947 by a Russian scientist, adaptogens describe substances that increase the body's ability to adapt to the stress of these modern times and increases inherent resistance to disease. Adaptogenics are identified by their non-specific, broad health benefits. They increase the body's inherent life force, increase stamina and endurance and improve the overall quality of physical well being. By their very nature, adaptogens are non toxic and have no side effects even when used over a long period of time.

Longevity: Longevity ~ a long and healthy duration of life

The Worlds Most Famous Adaptogens and Longevity herbs used for 'Saging', or 'Aging with Grace' include the following ~

Ashwanganda (*Withania somnifera*)

An ancient Ayurvedic herb, Ashwanganda is sometimes referred to as the 'Indian Ginseng' and is an excellent adaptogenic herb. It increases the body's overall ability to adapt to and resist stress. In India it is used to increase memory and facilitate learning and is specifically indicated for reduced levels of energy, general debilitation, reduced sexual energy, nervous tension, stress, and anxiety.

Preparation tips: Ashwanganda has a peculiar taste and odor, but can be blended with other more flavorful herbs such as ginger, sarsaparilla, and cinnamon to make a nice tasting tea. In India, the root is powdered and mixed with milk for a classic rejuvenating drink. Try blending it with your favorite chai tea blend for a delicious restorative drink.

Astragalus (*Astragalus membranaceus*)

A wonderfully energizing and tonic herb, astragalus is one of the most outstanding herbs for building immune strength and energizing the entire body. It stimulates the deep immune system and helps to rebuild the bone marrow reserve that supports and regenerates the body's 'protective shield' or immune system. It is used to both prevent and treat long term infections including chronic colds, repeating flu, candida and Epstein-Barr syndrome. Astragalus also promotes circulatory health and stimulates metabolism of dietary sugars, thus is often used by people with diabetes.

There have been several promising studies on using astragalus with cancer patients undergoing radiation and/or chemotherapy. One study published in *Cancer*, a publication of the American Cancer Society, reported that an aqueous extract of astragalus improved the immune function in 90% of the cancer patients studied. In studies done over an eight year period at the National Cancer Research Institute and five other research institutes, astragalus was shown to improve the immune system of cancer patients as well as lessen the negative side effects of the cancer treatment. Working as a true adaptogen, the herb

strengthens the immune systems ability to resist infection thereby contributing to the overall well being of the patient.

Astragalus is one of the most popular tonic herbs in China and is often called the ‘young people’s ginseng’ as it is specifically indicated as an energizer for younger people, though it is equally important for elderly people as well. It is one of the most important herbs used in Chinese fu-zheng therapy, a system of herbalism that treats disease by enhancing the over all system and normalizing the ‘chi’ or central energy of the body.

Preparation Tips: The root is often sliced, pressed, and cured in honey and bears a remarkable resemblance to the tongue depressors used by dentists. Look for long wide straight roots, generally whitish or cream colored with a yellowish core. The root has a sweet flavor and blends well with other herbs. The chopped roots are made into a flavorful tea, the powder makes a delicious paste when mixed with honey, and the root is often added to warming soups as they slowly simmer.

Ginseng (Panax and related species)

Ginseng has the reputation of being one of the world’s best longevity and adaptogenic herbs and is renowned for its ability to promote vitality, improve immune function and over all well being. It has a long history of use and is considered a superior tonic herb in every country in which it is found growing. The name, Panax, is derived from the Greek *pan*, ‘all’, and *akos*, ‘cure’ or cure all, though ginseng is most often regarded as a tonic or adaptogenic agent rather than a specific curative. In traditional Chinese herbalism, ginseng is said to promote a long and happy life. It is used to benefit the spirit or mind as well as the physical body. There are several species of ginseng with subtle differences between them, but all contain adaptogenic properties and all are used to promote longevity and well being. Select roots that are at least 6 years or older and try to purchase organically cultivated roots and/or woods stimulated roots (cultivated in the woodlands) when possible. Commercial ginseng is often cultivated under intensive conditions with pesticides and fungicides and is of inferior quality. Buy ginseng from reputable growers and try to buy organically cultivated whenever possible.

Preparation tips: Ginseng has a fine robust flavor and makes a nice beverage tea. It blends well with many other herbs. Try serving it with ginger and cinnamon in a chi type blend. Sliced and soaked in honey, it makes a tasty treat. Ginseng powder is also mixed with other tonic herbs, blended with honey and spices to make a delicious concoction that can be used directly in tea or spread on crackers.

Warning: American Ginseng is seriously stressed in its native habitat and is included on the United Plant Savers’ At Risk list. Use only organically cultivated or woods grown ginseng (ginseng that’s been planted and tended in woodland settings). Support the farmers who are growing it!

Siberian Ginseng (Eleutherococcus senticosus)

This is the herb that the term adaptogenic was coined for. Though not a true ginseng, it is a close relative of the Panax family and contains similar properties. A superior adaptogenic and longevity herb, it has an impressive range of health benefits. It is one of the best herbs for increasing endurance and stamina and to build and enhance our resistance to stress factors whether they are emotional, physical or psychological. There

are numerous studies on Eleuthero that prove its adaptogenic properties; Russian athletes experienced a 9% improvement in stamina when taking Eleuthero for one month; professional skiers before racing were given 3 dropperfuls of eleuthero which measurably increased their physical endurance and resistance to the cold; one thousand factory workers who took 3 dropperfuls of eleuthero extract daily showed an over all 50% reduction in general sickness and 40% reduction in number of days lost due to illness (*Economic and Medicinal Plant Research*, Vol. I, by Dr. Norman Farnsworth). Unlike Panax ginseng, Eleuthero is found growing in abundance over a large range in Siberia and other cold northern climates. It is being cultivated in cold northern areas of the United States and grows into a large tree like shrub. **Preparation tips:** The flavor of Eleuthero is rather pleasant and blends well with other tonic and adaptogenic herbs in tea. It is nice mixed with warming spices such as cinnamon and ginger. The powder is often mixed into food and the roots are an important ingredient in 'Long Life' wines and elixirs.

Ho Shou Wu or Fo ti (*Polygonum multiflorum*)

Next to Ginseng, Ho Shou Wu, or Fo-Ti as it is often called, is the most renowned and the most written about longevity/adaptogenic herb. Its uses were recorded as early as 1578 in the famous Pen Ts'ao, It is said to restore vitality and purportedly, will restore original hair color that has faded or turned silver and has a long reputation as a 'youth preserver, rejuvenator and sexual tonic'. Used for hundreds of years by literally millions of people to increase vitality and inner strength, it has a solid reputation that only seems to increase with time.

Though an important energizer, it is also used during times of stress and anxiety to promote a feeling of calm and relaxation. Modern studies have shown Fo Ti to contain resveratrol and lecithin, compounds that have a beneficial effect on cholesterol levels and enhance circulatory function.

Fo Ti is often combined with other tonic herbs and is found in hundreds of longevity formulas. It was a favorite herb of Li Ch'ing Yuen, a famous scribe of ancient China who wrote about Fo Ti as early as 1578 in the now famous Pen Ts'ao. Li Ch'ing lived to be a venerable elder and credited his longevity to his daily consumption of Ho Shou Wu mixed with ginseng, lycii berries and other tonic herbs.

Preparation tips: It is excellent combined with ginseng, and/or astragalus and/or can be mixed with other powdered herbs such as ginseng, licorice, cinnamon and cardamom into a paste with honey. Spread this paste on toast or crackers or mix in hot water for an 'instant tea'.

Rhodiola (*Rhodiola roseas*)

This amazing adaptogenic herb thrives in the cold northern regions of the world. Native to Siberia, Northern Canada, Scandinavia, Tibet, and other northern regions, Rhodiola has a long history of use as an adaptogenic and tonic herb. Though it's a small succulent that actually looks quite delicate, it is able to survive the toughest weather and imparts its tenacity and its ability to 'hold fast' to those who use it. Early uses go back to the Vikings who used it to enhance physical endurance as well as mental clarity. It seems

that in every culture where it grows, its been used for similar purposes. Siberians used it to enhance immunity and prevent illness; Tibetans used it to increase circulation and increase energy, and the Chinese used it, and would go to great lengths to procure it, to increase long life and enhance sexuality. Modern day research seems to validate what our ancestors knew. Over 180 scientific studies on Rhodiola have been conducted and most confirm the adaptogenic and energy enhancing properties of this remarkable little plant.

Suggest uses: one of the best herbs for depletion, lack of energy, and depression. Mix with other adaptogenic and tonic herbs to help rebuild and replenish the nervous system. Can be used when cutting back on coffee or withdrawals from other addictive substances. Rhodiola will help restore and rebuild energy. Its helps rebuild and restore a depleted immune system so is helpful after long term illness, or recovering from trauma and accidents. It is excellent for altitude sickness, especially when combined with reishi mushroom. David Winston and Stephen Maimes in their excellent book *Adaptogenics, Herbs for Stress, Stamina and Stress Relief*, mention using Rhodiola for hyperactivity and attention deficient disorders. They also mention its use for head trauma injuries. My friend and fellow herbalist, Pam Montgomery, shared with me how Rhodiola was the only thing that helped her with the insomnia she was experiencing as a result of menopause. I have since recommended to several menopausal women, all with similar positive results. For people suffering from Lyme, I've found it to be helpful to provide energy and stamina without depleting the system. Its an amazing herb, and is rapidly becoming one of my favorite adaptogens, especially since I can grow it in Vermont!

Schizandra (*Schizandra chinensis*)

Called 'five flavored plant' or wu wei tsu in Chinese medicine, Schizandra has five distinguished flavors: sweet, salty, sour, pungent and bitter. Each flavor follows the proceeding one until the palette is engulfed in the entire taste sensation. It is said that each flavor activates and balances a different organ system and because of this schizandra is known as a superior tonic herb. It is classified as an adaptogenic herb, raising the body's ability to resist all manners of stress and disease. It has enjoyed a great reputation in China and was used at one time primarily by wealthy upper middle class women as a preserver of youth, a beauty aide, and a powerful sexual tonic. Today, whether wealthy or poor, female or male, we all can receive the benefits of using it

It is a great herb for increasing endurance. On a study done on polo and racehorses, schizandra was proven to increase the speed and recovery time of the animals after racing. Researchers found that horses on schizandra not only increased their 800 meter time from 52.2 to 50.4 seconds (a competitive advantage of six lengths), but also their breathing and heart rates returned to normal more quickly than those horses that were on the placebo. People too have used schizandra to increase endurance and stamina for hundreds of years.

Preparation Tips: Schizandra berries have a unique flavor; people either love them or not. Mixed with ginseng, they increase stamina and endurance and are often used by those in sports or for long hikes. They can be soaked in fruit juice and/or wine for a tonic

drink or cooked in honey until soft and jam like. Added to tea, they add a sour lemon like flavor that is quite pleasant.

Reishi (*Gandoerma lucidum, G. lucidum, and G. applanatum*)

Reishi is known as the “mushroom of immortality” in Japan and considered one of the most valuable longevity tonics in Chinese medicine. The oldest known record on reishi describes its beneficial effects on the heart, memory, and overall health and well-being. Its been used for centuries for a variety of ailments, reishi is considered ‘*the*’ medicine for vital energy, over all health and well being. A warming tonic, it nourishes and tones the system, while removing toxins.

Suggested uses: It is used in cancer therapies and to help restore depilated energy and vitality. Today it is used to help treat many age-related disorders, such as coronary heart disease, high cholesterol, arthritis, immune disorders, and cancers, along with increasing (enhancing) energy and over all good health. Christopher Hobbs, well-known herbalist and expert on mushrooms, states that reishi ‘ is especially suitable as a calming herb for people with anxiety, sleeplessness, or nervous energy accompanied by adrenal deficiency’.

Holy Basil (*Ocimum sanctum*)

In India where this herb originates, it is revered as a plant sacred to Lakshmi, wife of Vishnu, the god who preserves life. In India, its commonly referred to as Tulsi, which means ‘unmatched’ and in Ayurvedic healing, it is considered ‘matchless’ for cardiovascular problems, hypertension, diabetes, stress, and age related illnesses. Holy Basil, or Tulsi, has a long history of being used to increase energy, vitality and as an herb for longevity and well being. A cousin to Sweet Basil (*O. basilicum*), Holy Basil is easy to grow and is often grown in pots placed on sunny areas around the house as it also repels flies and other insects.

Preparation tips: Holy basil can be used either fresh or dried. It makes a delicious invigorating tea and is often mixed with peppermint and/or lemon balm to make a refreshing beverage blend.

Adaptogens don’t grow in foreign lands only

Though the herbs mentioned in this article are renowned longevity/adaptogenic herbs of China and India, there are many equally important ones found growing on the North American continent and are important adaptogenic tonics in Western Herbalism. Dandelion root (*Taraxacum officinale*), burdock root (*Arctium lappa*), nettle (*Urtica dioica*), milk thistle seed (*Silybum marianum*), ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*), hawthorn (*Crataegus spp.*) and oats (*Avena sativa*) are all considered to be important adaptogenics and are used frequently by herbalists to increase energy, restore viatly and promote a long and healthy life.

On Kava ~ an herb for ‘our time’. An excellent herb for stress and anxiety.

Kava-kava (*Piper methysticum*)

Kava is native to the warm tropical regions of the world and is found in Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia. Though highly revered for hundreds of years in its native culture as a medicine and ceremonial herb, Kava only recently has become popular in the

west. But in a few short years, it has climbed in popularity to the top of the chart in popularity. Kava is a wonderfully relaxing herb, and eases tension and stress. It is a wonderfully relaxing, calming herb that seems to relax the body while opening the mind. An old saying goes, 'where Kava is the heart opens and there is only love'. Kava was used traditionally to sooth arguments and brings peace between individuals and communities. I think we need to serve it in the White House.

Suggested uses: Kava produces a sense of relaxation and at the same time heightens awareness and mental acuity. Known for its relaxing properties, kava reduces tension, anxiety, and stress. It also has analgesic, or pain relieving properties. Kava is great to take before flying or traveling for those who have a fear of flying or driving. I generally take a few drops of Kava tincture before public speaking, as it relaxes my body and 'brightens my mind'. Kava is an excellent tonic for people who get anxious and worried. Rather than block neurotransmitters, Kava contains kavalactones, active chemical constituents that relax muscles and tone nerve endings.

Caution: Kava is considered a sacred herb in the cultures where it's found growing natively and was an herb used primarily in feasts and celebrations. When over used and/or with abusive use, i.e. drinking it to the point of intoxication, Kava can cause nausea, muscle weakness, and induce unconsciousness. It is not recommended to drive after drinking a lot of Kava as it can simulate 'drunk driving'. However, using kava in responsible amounts as a medicine and tonic is safe and non-toxic. There are studies that report that Kava can be toxic to the liver and cause skin disorders, but again, that is only when used in large amounts over long periods of time. Be respectful of the power of this herb. Used judiciously, it is a wonderful relaxant and stress reliever.

Preparation tips: Kava is available as tincture, extract, and capsules. The tincture is a quick, effective, and handy form to use. It is helpful in times of stress when you need a quick relaxant, something that helps put the world in perspective. Capsules are effective for long-term stress and anxiety. Kava has a unique flavor that may take getting used to. Don't be alarmed the first time you try it; it will numb the tongue and create tingling sensations throughout the mouth. These are temporary and are caused by the kavalactones. I often prepare and serve Kava Chai at conferences and classes as away of opening the heart and relaxing the body. Mix Kava with cinnamon, ginger, and a small amount of cardamom. Other tonic nervine herbs such as Siberian ginseng can be added as well. Simmer over low heat for an hour or two. For each quart of tea, add one-cup coconut milk. Let the mixture sit overnight or several hours, then strain out the herbs and discard. Add honey to taste. Serve either hot or cold. Serve this 'punch' at your next family get together. It definitely seems to elevate the spirits and brighten the mood.