

TCM: flower power

Chrysanthemum, one of the most popular plants in China, has been grown by the Chinese for about 2,500 years. Originally just a small yellow flower, generations of cultivation has seen the number of species grow to more than 30, with a great variety in size, shape, colour and time of bloom.

Chrysanthemums are found all over China and thrive in wet and cold conditions. They blossom from September to December with flowers that usually last throughout the winter.

Apart from being decorative, four kinds of small-head chrysanthemums are used as a medicinal herb in TCM.

Generally, chrysanthemums are classified as an exterior releasing agent treating disharmonies in the superficial portion of the body. Cool in nature, they enter the liver and lung meridians.

The medicinal chrysanthemums are cultivated in different parts of China. Due to different origins, species and processing methods, chrysanthemums may differ slightly in their

therapeutic effects. They can be categorised by colour and taste. The sweet white chrysanthemum is a speciality of Zhejiang province. It is good for clearing the liver and strengthening the eyes. Yellow chrysanthemum is bitter and is used in feverish conditions such as the common cold or influenza.

Chrysanthemum is a common

ingredient in clinical applications. When fever, headache and cough occur at the start of a "cold", chrysanthemum can be combined with mulberry leaf and peppermint, forming the well-known Mulberry Leaf and Chrysanthemum Decoction (*sang ju yin*). Vision fatigue or conjunctivitis can be relieved by chrysanthemum combining cassia seeds and gentian root. For blurred vision and watery eyes, seen in elderly and weakened people, it is used with wolfberry and *Rhemannia rhizome*.

It can treat hypertension accompanied with headaches and dizziness when used with abalone shell and nacre. It can also combine with honeysuckle flower and liquorice root for skin sores.

The rich content of volatile oils in chrysanthemums make it suitable for infusion. In southern China, chrysanthemum tea is a traditional refreshing herbal beverage used for relieving heat from the body. White or yellow chrysanthemum is simply boiled and rock sugar added as a sweetener. In summer, chrysanthemum alone may not be strong enough to dispel the heat and dampness, and so a mixture of

other herbs will be used. Five-flower tea is a typical example. This contains the main floral ingredients such as honeysuckle flower, chrysanthemum, silk cotton, *Plumeria rubra* and *Pueraria lobata*. This beverage helps to alleviate common ailments such as fatigue, sore throat, indigestion, poor appetite, insomnia and urinary difficulty. The boiled flowers may be kept in the fridge and used as eye masks to ease tired eyes or to get rid of bags under the eyes. Today, various canned or packed herbal beverages are available.

Chrysanthemum is classified as a cooling food ingredient in Chinese cuisine.

It is added to hot pot as the harbinger of coldness to neutralise the hotness of the dish and to make it suitable in all seasons. In the old days, when chrysanthemums began to bloom it was considered the right time to start eating hot pot.

Although chrysanthemum can be safely consumed on a regular basis, it has not been tested on its interaction with other herbs or diets. As it is cool in nature, it should be used with caution for frequent sufferers from diarrhoea.

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