

HEALTH

Edited by Suzanne Harrison suzanne.harrison@scmp.com

TCM

Rose Tse and
Angela Collingwood
info@shen-nong.com

Berry good

Visitors to Beijing will find street vendors offering a red berry snack coated with icy sugar. It's called *bing tang hu lu* or icy gourd. It's not really a gourd, but a Chinese hawthorn fruit. It's a popular snack and is a traditional Chinese medicinal fruit.

According to TCM theory, Chinese hawthorn is slightly warm and affects the spleen, stomach and liver channels.

TCM practitioners use it to strengthen the stomach and improve digestion, especially after immoderate eating of meat. It also helps to alleviate diarrhoea, and – if eating too much meat or fatty foods have contributed to hypertension – hawthorn is believed to lower blood pressure.

Hawthorn's use in remedying stomach ailments is likely to have begun in the Tang Dynasty.

Yang Guifei, one of the four beauties of ancient China, was a most beloved consort of Emperor Tang Xuanzong. She had a history of indigestion and enteritis (inflammation of the intestine) that went uncured by the emperor's doctors.

One day, a Taoist priest introduced himself to the emperor and claimed that he could heal the consort. After diagnosis, he prescribed hawthorn juice.

Initially, the emperor was dubious about the priest's prescription, but the priest was his final hope. After using hawthorn for two weeks, the consort was significantly better.

As this story spread through China, hawthorn became one of the popular herbs.

The use of hawthorn has also been recorded in Europe. In Norse mythology, hawthorn was created in a bolt of lightning by the god Thor. It was, therefore, believed that hawthorn could protect against lightning and storms at sea. Although the species used in Europe and China are different – *C. oxyacantha* and *C. pinnatifida* – the recorded effects are similar.

In Europe, botanical texts first recorded the use of hawthorn as early as the 15th century. How does modern science regard hawthorn? According to a clinical review in the *American Journal of Health-System Pharmacists 2002*, hawthorn helps benefit the cardiovascular system.

It can assist with regulation of heart-muscle contractions, increase the integrity of blood vessel walls and improve coronary blood flow and has a positive effect on oxygen use.

Hawthorn has also been reported to reduce the concentration of total cholesterol and low density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol – the so-called bad cholesterol. It's also said to be an excellent source of antioxidants – at least seven types have been identified.

Although hawthorn can relieve indigestion, it's not recommended immediately after

eating seafood. This is because hawthorn is a tannic acid-rich fruit, whereas seafood is protein-rich with calcium.

The tannic acid reacts with the fish proteins and calcium and becomes indigestible. Other fruits to be avoided after eating seafood include persimmons, grapes and pomegranates.

Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner