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FAQ's

History of the MayApple Plant

Native Americans valued the MayApple as a purgative emetic, and liver tonic. The Cherokee nibbled the boiled root as a strong laxative; they also made pills out of boiled root syrup for the same purpose. Drops of liquid from the fresh rhizome were used to improve hearing. Powdered root went into a remedy to cure skin ulcers and sores. The Delaware used the roots to make a "spring tonic." The Iroquois made a cold infusion of the root as strong purgative and to increase strength, while the Meskwaki took a root preparation for rheumatism. A number of tribes used the fruit to remove warts and the Maine's Penobscot Indians use the MayApple to treat certain types of cancer. MayApple was introduced into American folk medicine in the 1780's. By the 1800's, mayapple particularly the resin extracted from the rhizome, was regarded by both herbal and conventional medical practitioners as one of the most powerful laxatives available. It was also used for a wide array of other disorders and diseases, including rheumatism, jaundice, typhoid, cholera, dysentery, hepatitis, gonorrhea, and syphilis, as well as menstrual and prostate problems. Because of its toxicity the use of the mayapple declined in herbal medicine. The United States Food and Drug Administration declared it unsafe for even as a laxative. Then in the 1970's, pharmaceutical research into some of the mayapple's most toxic chemical constituents led to development of several anticancer agents that stop cell division. These substances have been used in treating external carcinomas, venereal warts, and several types of cancers.

MayApple needs rich, humusy, moist soil and partial shade to grow well. It is propagated by division of the rhizomous runners. Rhizomes are lifted in autumn for the extraction of the compounds used in commercial pharmaceuticals.

MayApple rhizome contains a resin called "Podophyllin" that has been used in preparations to kill certain types of benign skin tumors such as warts. These resin preparations, typically administered by health care professionals, are applied to very small areas in minute amounts and for limited times, because they are easily absorbed through the skin and can cause serious systemic side effects. Podophyllin is composed of several toxic glycosides, the most active of which is podophyllotoxin. Two derivatives of podophyllotoxin that have been formulated into anticancer drugs are etoposide and teniposide. These are powerful agents that kill cells, particularly those that are undergoing cell division. They are used in chemotherapy to inhibit the growth of tumors, which are characterized by uncontrolled cell division. Etoposide is used mainly to treat testicular cancer that has not responded to other treatment and as first-line treatment for small-cell lung cancers. It is also used to treat Kaposi's sarcoma, lymphomas, and malignant melanomas. Teniposide is used less often than etoposide; mainly, it is used to treat lymphomas.

Storage:

Store in a cool, dry place after opening. Should keep indefinitely.

(According to The National Geographic, Desk Reference to Nature's Medicine, 2006.)