

ORTHOSIPHON - MORE THAN A PRETTY FLOWER

By Benjamin Drewe, Medical Herbalist

Often found in local gardens for its attractive ornamental flower is the tropical herb *Orthosiphon aristatus / stamineus* or “*Misai Kucing*” in Malay, which translates as Cat’s Whiskers, after its attractive flower. While this plant is native to South East Asia, its medicinal virtues are less well known here in Malaysia as in other parts of the world.

The early Dutch colonialists in Indonesia were introduced to this herb and found it was a pleasant tasting herbal tea and blood cleanser and named it *Java Tea*. Convinced of its goodness, they took it back to Europe where it enters into the Official Herbal Pharmacopeias of several European countries.

The author’s research on this herb began in 1994 and led to the inclusion of *Misai Kucing* in a proprietary formulation for joint aches and pains as a result of arthritis, gout and rheumatism. Its novel inclusion in a product for this health problem was due to its ability to actively promote the excretion of uric acid and metabolic wastes from within the muscles and joints. When these acids build up in the tissues and combine with poor circulation, pain and inflammation can result. In this proprietary formulation the herb is combined with the extracts of *Centella asiatica (Pegaga)* to promote blood circulation as well as *Curcuma longa (Kunyit)* and *Zingiber officinale (Halia)* for their natural anti-inflammatory properties. This product has enjoyed good success in pharmacies in Malaysia for the past 10 years and is an example of an effective herbal alternative to suppressive medications for joint pain.

Current research has traced the herbs effects to its active phenolic and flavonoid components. These compounds promote cellular cleansing and enhanced protection through several mechanisms. Firstly, it improves elimination via the kidneys (diuresis) of metabolic acids and sodium, while being gentle on the kidneys. This makes it one of herbal medicines safest diuretics. Some of the earliest published research on the herb was done in regards evaluating its traditional use for eliminating kidney stones. It is one of the few herbs approved by the German Government for increasing urine volume to help prevent kidney stones. It is considered specifically in the prevention of uric acid stone formation. Recommended dosage of dried herb is 300-800 mg daily, which is about 1.5 to 4 grams of fresh leaves. Here it must be mentioned that treatment of kidney disease and kidney stones should only be done under professional guidance. Kidney-related problems are almost always a sign of a more systemic condition and the cause of imbalance, infection or degeneration must be understood.

Researchers from the Faculty of Pharmacy, Fukuyama University, Japan found that some of the herb’s compounds promoted a continuous decrease in systolic blood pressure by virtue of a vasodilating action, a decrease in cardiac output and the diuretic action in eliminating sodium. This explains clearly its positive effects in hypertension for which it has documented traditional use in Indonesia for several hundred years.

In a study published in 2007 by the School of Pharmaceutical Sciences at Universiti Sains Malaysia the herb was found to contain antioxidant and free radical scavenging properties that also confirmed it’s traditional use in liver problems as it was shown to promote liver protection from toxicity in a dose dependant manner.

Traditional Indonesian herbalists have also used the herb for diabetes and this effect was confirmed when in 2007 researchers from the Department of Pharmacology, Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand published a report on the effects of Orthosiphon on blood glucose in diabetic induced rats. The study showed that in an oral glucose tolerance test, the extract (0.2-1.0g/kg) significantly decreased plasma glucose concentration in a dose-dependent manner in both normal and diabetic rats. By the end of the study the lipid profile had also improved with plasma triglyceride concentration lower in the extract-treated diabetic rats than untreated ones and the HDL (good) cholesterol concentration was significantly increased in diabetic rats treated with the extract.

Here is a good example of a traditional medicine that is supported by scientific validation for each of its traditional uses. Most importantly the herb offers a safe and effective support for the most common conditions of ageing namely; joint aches and pains, hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol.

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