

Cardio-vascular and circulatory Herbs - Hilary Self BSc MNIMH

Modern Western herbal medicine works on the principle that the body must be regarded and treated as a whole. This is in contrast to modern allopathic medicine that tends to focus on the presenting symptoms of disease and then treat those symptoms in isolation.

Heat has always equated to health and vitality in the body.

Samuel Thomson – “The Father of American Herbalism” - built his whole therapeutics system around the principle that disease was a cold intrusion into the body and that for the body to become well, the remedies should heat and warm the weakened body.

In every tradition, whether it is Western Herbal medicine, Traditional Chinese Herbal medicine (Yang tonics) or Native American Herbal medicine, there is frequent use of herbs that have a heating, stimulatory, or warming action. These include hot spices and pungent remedies, as well as the gentler warming herbs to support and treat the effects of cold and damp on the chest and respiratory systems.

In addition to herbs given internally, these stimulatory and warming herbs can also be used topically to bring relief to painful joints by use of hot packs, plasters, compresses or even using fresh herbs to flay the joint! More of this later.

Whether used internally or externally these herbs work by stimulating the circulation, increasing tissue perfusion, increasing oxygenation, promoting cellular regeneration, removing toxins and waste products from tissues and then encouraging the excretion of these waste products from the body via the liver, kidneys or skin.

I have used all of the following herbs and spices in my formulations for horses, dogs, and people.

Hawthorn “Nurse of the Old Heart” – *Crataegus oxycanthoides*.

The famous Herbalist, Heinz Zeylstra, who founded the UK school of Phytotherapy used to tell us that everyone aged 50 or over should take Hawthorn!

Hawthorn contains procyanidins (OPC), Flavanoids including rutin, quercetin and flavone C. The flowers contain the highest levels of flavonoids, and the leaves contain the highest levels of OPC, so is why the preferred plant part for use is the flowering tops and leaves.

Either the flowering tops or the berries can be used and, given the opportunity, most horses will actively seek out and eat both parts of the plant depending on the time of year. Hawthorn’s action is that of a peripheral vasodilator, (I like to think of it as the ‘herbal isoxoprine’), and is specific for the coronary arteries. Hawthorn works on the whole of the cardiac muscle fibre, increasing coronary blood flow and acting as a trophorestorative. I use Hawthorn for horses with laminitis (founder) navicular disease, senior horses, heart murmur, and for any inflammatory joint conditions.

Prickly Ash – *Zanthoxylum americanum*

I use this herb in our Circulate Support mix for navicular and laminitis, remembering that there are two circulatory systems - arterial and venous. Prickly ash was used extensively by the Native Americans for its circulatory, sweat inducing and stimulatory action.

This is a really warming and stimulatory herb, it is excellent for use where cold or poor circulation are factors, such as navicular, oedema, laminitis, and arthritis. It is a tonic herb and a stimulant to both arterial and capillary circulation and will improve circulation of blood through the brain.

Nettle – *Urtica dioica*

The humble nettle regarded by most as just a troublesome weed.

Nettle contains high levels of vitamins and minerals along with serotonin, histamine, formic acid, silica, and tannins.

Nettle is an important circulatory stimulant and is specific for helping to encourage the removal of toxins and waste products from the body.

Skin conditions respond well to nettle and it is an absolute must if you are using depurative herbs such as burdock. The burdock will pull toxins and waste products from the tissues and the nettle will then encourage the removal of the toxins from the system via the kidneys.

Arthritic and rheumatic conditions also call for nettle, and the plant will not only provide essential nutrients which can often be a contributing factor to joint disease, but they will also supply the right sort of nutrients to help deal with chronic joint inflammation

Bilberry – *Vaccinium myrtillus*

Bilberry fruit helps peripheral vascular disorders, venous insufficiency particularly of the lower limbs. It is excellent for conditions such as navicular, arthritis, rheumatism, and laminitis where it helps with both improving circulation and strengthening weak or damaged capillaries. It is also fantastic for wound healing, GI disorders, inflammation and for eyesight disorders and poor night vision.

Yarrow – *Achillea millefolium*

There is probably no other herb that has so many or such diverse applications as Yarrow. It is safe and effective and in this context is specific for improving circulation to the pelvic region. Yarrow is excellent for helping with pelvic congestion and I use it for my female patients who suffer with PMS and irregular, missed, or heavy periods.

The oil contains cineol which has an antiseptic and anthelmintic action. The oil acts as a carminative, antispasmodic, and anti inflammatory.

For equine application I use it in the Hilton Herbs mixes for mares (Easy Mare & Easy Mare Gold) that are prone to mood swings or physical discomfort as a result of hormonal imbalance. Yarrow not only improves pelvic circulation but it is also anti

inflammatory, a tonic for arterioles and venules, and is a vaso regulator and excellent for relieving abdominal cramping.

Rosemary – *Rosmarinus officinalis*

This is one of my favourite herbs, I like to use it particularly for elderly animals. Rosemary has volatile oils in the leaves which contain camphor, borneol, pinene, and cineol. The plant also contains rosmarinic and salicylic acids.

Rosemary has traditionally been used to improve blood supply to the brain, as an antidepressant, circulatory tonic, sedative, and to improve mental concentration. I like to use this herb for elderly animals as it is very specific for rheumatic and aching joints and muscles.

Topically Rosemary oil can be used as a *rubefacient*, that is an agent that when applied to the skin will improve and increase blood supply to that particular area (e.g. a joint or area of muscle), and as a result increase heat in the tissues. The improved blood supply in the affected area will then aid with absorption of the active ingredients in the cream, lotion etc.

Ginkgo – *Ginkgo biloba*

This is what I call the ‘top n tail’ herb because in people it can be used to help treat haemorrhoids or senile dementia!

The Ginkgo tree has survived unchanged for around 150 million years! Clinical research has shown that the leaves are a circulatory stimulant, that they will increase blood flow, increase tissue oxygenation and tissue nutrition. The leaves will also prevent membrane damage by free radicals, and enhance memory and cognitive function especially in the elderly.

This last action should certainly recommend its use for elderly horses and dogs who, as they age, can become disorientated and confused displaying very similar behaviour to people with senile dementia!

I like to use this herb for conditions such as laminitis, poor peripheral circulation, arthritis, navicular, and elderly horses and dogs.

N.B. Avoid the use of Ginkgo if your horse or dog is being given anticoagulant or anti platelet medications such as warfarin or aspirin.

Ginger - *Zingiber officinale*

The ginger root contains an essential oil containing Zingiberene and the pungent hot principles the Gingerols. Herbalists like to use ginger because it helps to carry and speed up the absorption of the other herbs in the prescription into the system. It is an excellent circulatory stimulant and can be used both internally and externally as a rubefacient.

Ginger will increase sweating and should be used for any condition that has a ‘cold’ aspect. It is ideal for stimulating the circulation to cold extremities so would be beneficial for conditions such as navicular, filled legs, or for elderly horses whose circulation may be more sluggish.

Turmeric – *Curcuma longa*

A really pungent, warming, and stimulatory herbs.

Turmeric contains essential oil and yellow pigments including curcumin which give the herb its anti inflammatory, antiplatelet, anti oxidant, and hypolipidaemic action.

In India, turmeric is used as a digestive tonic and blood purifier whilst in China it is said to be a blood and Qi (vital energy) stimulant with analgesic actions.

In western herbal medicine it is used for its cardiovascular, anti inflammatory, anti microbial, hypolipidaemic, carminative, and depurative properties.

When storing turmeric make sure it is put into a dark container as the curcumin in the herb will decompose if exposed to sunlight.

These are just a few of my favourite circulatory herbs that I have used successfully for horses, dogs and people over the last 25 years. All the herbs are readily available and can be found in many of the proprietary mixes Hilton Herbs produces, such as Circulate Support, Multi-Flex, Veteran Equine and Canine, and Easy Mare

Other herbs that can be used as rubefacients are Ginger, Garlic, Cayenne, Mustard, Peppermint oil, Thyme, Wintergreen and Lavender.

Be aware that these oils and herbs generate a lot of heat, so use them sparingly. Horses with sensitive skin could blister if care is not taken.

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