**YAM, WILD**

*Dioscorea villosa*
[di-oh-SKOR-ee-uh vil-OW-suh]

**Family:** Dioscoreaceae

**Names:** Atlantic Yam, Colic root, China root, rheumatism root, Devil’s bones, dioscorea

**Description:** A deciduous perennial vine, climbing to 20 ft. Heart-shaped alternate leaves, hairy on the under surface, are borne singly along the slender stem. Flowers (June-July) are greenish white, tiny, and borne in loose clusters. Seeds form in yellowish-green winged triangular capsules.

**Cultivation:** Wild yam is native to North and Central America and has now become naturalized in tropical, semitropical and temperate climates around the world. An easily grown plant, succeeding in a fertile well-drained soil in a sunny position or light shade. Prefers a rich light soil. Plants are hardy to at least 17°F. Plants produce tubercles (small tubers that are formed in the leaf axils of the stems), and can be propagated by this means. A climbing plant that supports itself by twining around the branches of other plants. Dioecious. Male and female plants must be grown if seed is required. Seed - sow March to April in a sunny position in a warm greenhouse and only just cover. It germinates in 1 - 3 weeks at 52°F. Prick out the seedlings as soon as they are large enough to handle and grow on in a greenhouse for their first year. Plant out in late spring as the plant comes into new growth. Basal stem cuttings in the summer. Division in the dormant season, never when in growth. The plant will often produce a number of shoots, the top 5 - 10 cm of the root below each shoot can be potted up to form a new plant whilst the lower part of the root can possibly be eaten. Tubercles (baby tubers) are formed in the leaf axils. These are harvested in late summer and early autumn when about the size of a pea and coming away easily from the plant. They should be potted up immediately in individual pots in a greenhouse or cold frame. Plant out in early summer when in active growth. Basal stem cuttings in the summer. Division in the dormant season, never when in growth. The plant will often produce a number of shoots, the top 5 - 10 cm of the root below each shoot can be potted up to form a new plant whilst the lower part of the root can possibly be eaten. Tubercles (baby tubers) are formed in the leaf axils. These are harvested in late summer and early autumn when about the size of a pea and coming away easily from the plant. They should be potted up immediately in individual pots in a greenhouse or cold frame. Plant out in early summer when in active growth. Basal stem cuttings in the summer. Division in the dormant season, never when in growth.

**History:** Indians used a root decoction to relieve the pains of childbirth. The dried powdered root, boiled in water, was used to treat indigestion. Slaves used the root to treat muscular rheumatism. Aztec records show that Chipahuacxihuitle, or “The Graceful Plant” known to us as Dioscorea, was used for skin treatment of scabies and poultice for boils.

**Properties:** antispasmodic, antibilious, diaphoretic; diuretic; antirheumatic; anti-inflammatory

**Chemical Constituents:** steroidal saponins (mainly dioscin); phytosterols (beta-sitosterol); alkaloids; tannins; starch

**Energetics:** neutral, general drying, sweet, bitter, warm;
**Meridians/Organs affected:** liver, kidney, spleen

**Medicinal Uses:** The plant is also known as colic root and rheumatism root in North America, indicating its use by European settlers for these conditions. Diosgenin, a breakdown product of dioscin, was first identified by Japanese scientists in 1936. This discovery paved the way for the synthesis of progesterone and of corticosteroid hormones such as cortisone. For this reason it is sometimes expensive, because pharmaceutical firms buy up large crops on the global market. This use of the root, coupled with its traditional use as an antispasmodic and antirheumatic gave rise to the saying that wild yam is a natural steroid. Indeed, it contains compounds that are similar in chemical structure to steroids, but these compounds must be digested, absorbed and processed by one’s body before becoming steroids or hormones. Eating foods such as wild yam thus provides the building blocks for many complex glandular manufacturing processes. The herb’s combination of anti-inflammatory and antispasmodic actions makes it extremely useful in treatments for arthritis and rheumatism. It reduces inflammation and pain, and relaxes stiff muscles in the affected area. It stimulated the removal of accumulated wastes in the system. Wild yam helps to relieve cramps, muscle tension, and colic. It can be an effective treatment for digestive problems, including gallbladder inflammation, irritable bowel syndrome, and diverticulitis. In large doses it is regarded as a diuretic and acts as an expectorant.

In North and Central America, wild yam is a traditional relaxing remedy for painful menstruation, ovarian pain, and labor. It is classically given for uterine pain, such as severe menstrual pain, or shooting pain beyond cramps. It’s also used for ovarian spasm and inflammation such as occurs with pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). To relieve the nauseous symptoms of pregnancy, Dioscorein is the very best and is prompt in action given in small, frequent doses. It is useful as part of a natural approach to any endocrine imbalance. For extremely heavy periods wild yam root tincture, 20-30 drops taken daily for the two weeks preceding the expected onset of menses, can supply enough progesterone precursors to remedy flooding. Ointment made from wild yam roots may be the able to restore youthful moistness and elasticity to post-menopausal vaginal tissues. However, this is where a lot of misinformation and controversy occurs.

Today most USP progesterone is, in fact, extracted from soy. Neither USP nor human progesterone is present in either of the major plant sources (soybean or wild yam). Yams contain the sterol diosgenin, whereas soybeans contain the sterol stigmasterol—both of which have progesterone-like effects. The substances sold as USP progesterone is produced in the lab by hydrolyzing extracts of soy or yam and converting saponins into sapogenins, two of which, sarsasapogenin (soy) and diosgenin (yam) provide the majority of derivation of natural progesterone produced for medical purposes. While diosgenin may have some progestogenic or even phytoestrogenic action, the effect varies from one person to another. Some doctors say that the human body cannot convert wild yam or diosgenin to hormones and that conversion to progesterone must take place in a laboratory. It is possible, however, that some women’s bodies are better able to utilize plant-derived compounds than others. It is also important to remember that while the mechanism of phytogenic activity may not be clearly understood at this time, botanical supplementation continues to gain support among everywhere because it works for them. There has been a great deal of confusion pertaining to the progesterone content of various manufacturers’ transdermal creams. The bioavailability of the progesterone in such products is of paramount importance. The quality of a formulation and its delivery system determines the absorption and effectiveness. It’s essential that you know your product and your supplier and above all observe your body’s response to the product of your choice.
Wild yam, given in combination with black cohosh, is not only common in menopause formulas but is also an effective pain-relieving remedy for rheumatoid arthritis, especially in the inflamed stages of flare-up. Solvent in water.

As a primary liver tonic herb, wild yam activates and stimulates liver activity. High concentrations of steroidal saponins provide the building blocks required by the liver to synthesize sex hormones. Whenever both the liver and reproductive system are implicated as the cause of hormone imbalance, wild yam is the herb of choice to use in the formula.

Wild yam can help relieve the pain and inflammation of diverticulitis. The formula is 2 parts wild yam, one part valerian, one part black haw and one part peppermint. Make into a tea. Woman whose hair is starting to thin due to loss of estrogen production, there are herbs you can take to simulate estrogen in your system and to stimulate the adrenal glands. Mix equal parts of wild yam root, licorice, motherwort, black cohosh, chamomile, valerian root and skullcap. Take 2 daily.

**DOSE:** of the decoction. Use for the colicky pains associated with irritable bowel syndrome or diverticulitis. Decoct with willow bark for arthritic pains--2-4 oz;

**TINCTURE:** Take 5-10 drops as required for labor or postpartum pains. Can be combined with arthritic remedies such as celery seeds, angelica, meadowsweet, bogbean, or willow or the acute stages of rheumatoid arthritis

**TEA:** 1-2 tsp per cup, ½ to 2 oz per pint or 3 cups, take 1 cup three times a day

Powder in capsules is observed to give a minor side effect of intestinal gas

In a weight loss program the following tea will help stabilize a woman’s total health while she follows a program of healthy eating and exercise. It can reduce food cravings and gas and increase nutrition.

Garden in a cup of tea: 4 oz rosemary herb (improves circulation; reduces bloating; gas); 4 oz sage leaf (supports hormonal balance; tones bowel wall); 3 oz wild yam root (anti-inflammatory; supports hormonal stability); 1 oz licorice root (soothes, stabilizes blood sugar, elimination). Twelve oz will last 36 days. Ad 1/3 oz of the mixture to 3 cups of boiling water in a teapot or container with a well-fitting lid. Let stand for 15 minutes before straining. Drink 1 cup hot or cold three times a day five to thirty minutes before meals. Or, if you prefer, sip tea all day or drink two large glasses twice a day, making sure you drink 3 cups in a day.

**HOMEOPATHIC CLINICAL:** tincture of fresh root, or trituration of resinoid dioscorein used for: distended abdomen, acne, angina pectoris, biliousness, cholerine, chorea, colds, colic, constipation, cough, cramps, diarrhea, dysentery, dysmenorrhea, dyspepsia, enteralgia, flatulence, gastralgia, hemorrhoids, headache, pain in knees or legs; disorders of liver; lumbago; neuralgia; renal colic; rheumatism; sciatica; spinal irritations; pain in spleen; spermatorrhoea; toothache; whitlow

**Toxicity:** Its toxicity has not been well explored but mice who are fed the root regularly do not exhibit any unusual effects; however, each succeeding generation becomes slightly smaller in size.

**Culinary Uses:** Tuber can be cooked.

**References:**
Indian Herbalogy of North America, Alma R. Hutchens, Merco, 1973

Resources:
Companion Plants, www.companionplants.com
Crimson Sage, http://www.crimson-sage.com
Plants