**EPHEDRA**

*Ephedra sinica* and *E. vulgaris*  
[eh-FED-ruh SIN-ee-ka]

**Family:** Ephedraceae

**Names:** *E. sinica*: joint fir, Ma Huang (Chinese); *E. vulgaris*: desert tea, Mormon tea, whorehouse tea

**Description:** An evergreen shrub growing to 20 inches. It is an odd-looking, botanically primitive, almost leafless shrub that resembles horsetail. It has tough, jointed, barkless stems and branches, with small scale-like leaves and tiny yellow-green flowers that appear in summer. Male and female flowers appear on different plants. Seeds develop in cones.

**Cultivation:** It is propagated from seed in autumn or by root division in autumn or spring and needs well-drained soil. The stems are gathered throughout the year and dried. Grow in full sun and give water sparingly as these plants will not tolerate overwatering. Prefers a well drained, porous, rocky soil.

**History:** Ephedra was found in a Middle Eastern Neolithic grave, indicating that it may have been used as a medicine 60,000 years ago. According to legend the bodyguards of Genghis Khan, threatened with beheading if they fell asleep on sentry duty, used to take a tea containing ephedra to stay alert. The Indian variety, *E. gerardiana*, is thought to have been the prime ingredient of *soma*, a potent tonic and elixir of youth. When the Mormons reached Utah in 1847, local Indians introduced them to Native American ephedra, a piney-tasting tonic beverage. The Mormons adopted it as a substitute for coffee and tea and around the West it became known as Mormon tea. Make sure any ephedra you purchase is identified by species. *E. sinica* has the greatest decongestant/bronchodilator potential. In the Old West, American ephedra also developed a reputation as a cure for syphilis and gonorrhea. It was served at many brothels, where the name whorehouse tea came from and the Latin name for one species: *E. antisyphilitica*. However, in reality there’s no effect whatsoever on any venereal diseases.

**Constituents:** protoalkaloids (ephedrine, psuedoephedrine); tannins; saponin; flavone, volatile oil

**Properties:** diaphoretic, bronchial dilator; diuretic; stimulant; TCM: disperses cold; helps problems cause by “external cold”; aids movement of lung qi. Chinese ephedra contains significant amounts of ephedrine. The American species is richer in norpseudoephedrine.
**Energetics:** Twigs are pungent, bitter and warm. The root is pungent and neutral.

**Affinity:** lungs, bladder

**Medicinal Uses:** Ephedra’s active constituents are strong central nervous system stimulants, more powerful than caffeine but less potent than amphetamine. Ephedrine itself opens the bronchial passages, thus acting as a bronchodilator, stimulates the heart, and increases blood pressure, metabolic rate, and perspiration and urine production. It also reduces the secretion of both saliva and stomach acids. Traditional Zen monks used ephedra to promote calm concentration during meditation. In China, ephedra is popular for chills and fevers, coughs and wheezing, and in combination with rehmannia is given to treat kidney yin deficiency. For asthma use with almond; for “wind-cold” injury use with cinnamon; for allergic skin reaction use with mint and cicada moltings. Ephedra is used principally in current Western herbal medicine as a treatment for asthma and hay fever, and for the acute onset of colds and flu. It also helps to raise blood pressure, cool fevers, and alleviate rheumatism. The whole plant contains many compounds—some active, some inert, which in combination seem to act synergistically. The whole plant can be used at a much lower dosage than isolated constituents and it has significant therapeutic effects, including dilating the bronchial airways and increasing blood flow to the skin. Unlike ephedrine, the whole plant rarely gives rise to side effects. One study shows ephedrine helps smokers quit by decreasing cigarette cravings. Ephedrine causes uterine contractions in laboratory animals. Pregnant women should not use it. Other women may try it to initiate menstruation.

**REMEDIES:** Decoction is prescribed by herbalists for asthma
Powder is used by the Chinese to treat kidney energy deficiency
Tincture of the twigs is used in treatments to alleviate the aches and pains of rheumatism, asthma, hay fever, or severe chills. Combined with cowslip root and thyme tinctures for bronchial asthma, emphysema, whooping cough and other severe chest conditions. Recommended dose up to 1 ml three times a day.

Decoction of twigs is prescribed for common colds, coughs, asthma, and hay fever. Mix 1 tsp of dried ma huang per cup of water, bring to a boil, then simmer for 10-15 minutes. Drink up to 2 cups a day.

Decoction of the root is used by the Chinese where yin or qi weakness leads to uncontrolled sweating.

**Toxicity:** Not to be used by patients taking monoamine oxidase inhibitors as anti-depressants. Should be avoided in more severe cases of glaucoma, hypertension, and coronary thrombosis.

**Ritual Uses:** Herbe of Mars; Element: Fire; Gender: Male; Sign: Aries. Ephedra is considered “the original source of life” among the Chinese due to its stimulant properties and effect upon breathing. Work with this herbe when studying the nature of elemental spirit, the fifth element, which can be absorbed from the Universe through disciplined breathing exercises such as those learned through yoga.

**References:**

**Resources:**
Companion Plants, [www.companionplants.com](http://www.companionplants.com)
Crimson Sage, [http://www.crimson-sage.com](http://www.crimson-sage.com)