

Herbs that Feed the Brain: Ginkgo, Ginseng, Gotu kola, Rosemary

by Karen Unruh

The time is fall, and the garden has mostly been put to bed for the colder months to come. I am always pleased to see the leaf colour changes at this time of the year, and the ginkgo tree has fan-shaped leaves that turn a lovely yellow before they fall. *Ginkgo biloba* is the sole remaining survivor of the oldest known tree genus, Ginkgoaceae, which dates back more than 200 million years. Perhaps ginkgo is the excellent brain food and memory enhancer as it itself holds the memories of an entire age in the cellular makeup of its being. And, as it makes a striking architectural statement in our gardens, it can teach us all how to age gracefully.



Used for thousands of years as a brain function improver, it has been the subject of much testing in modern times. Use of ginkgo for at least six weeks has been shown to be effective. Ginkgo increases cerebral blood flow, is a strong antioxidant, and increases short and long term memory. A healthy brain needs high glucose and acetylcholine levels and ginkgo works to raise their levels to maintain high energy for optimum brain functioning. For research and testing, standardized ginkgo is used. Herbalists prefer to use the whole leaves instead. Collecting the green leaves and drying them is one way to go, but I only have a small tree so prefer to enjoy the yellow fall leaves and to buy the dried powdered leaf for using in the recipe for Brain Bars that I will share with you.

Ginseng has been used as a tonic herb in the Orient and now is also grown in BC's interior hot regions. Siberian ginseng, *Eleutherococcus senticosus*, is the ginseng often chosen by herbalists as the tonic to increase energy and stamina and to build our resistance to stress, so is useful for all parts of our bodies. In the brain, it increases cognitive function and rejuvenates the fatigued brain, being restorative and tonic in action. It helps when we feel 'we just can't think anymore'. The powdered root is used for our recipe.

Gotu kola, *Centella asiatica*, is a violet-like plant, native to tropical areas and used for centuries in Ayurvedic medicine, the ancient healing art of India. It is especially recommended for memory loss. It gently but firmly increases mental alertness and vitality by feeding and nourishing the brain. As with ginkgo, it needs to be used consistently for 4 to 6 weeks before one would notice 'a pleasant feeling of being more alert'. Fresh leaves are used in salads and teas in India but we will have to use dried powdered gotu kola for our recipe.

Rosemary, *Rosmarinus officinalis*, discussed in an earlier column, stimulates the flow of blood to and in the brain. This supplies the brain with food and oxygen and thus is being recognized as an excellent memory aid.

I have adapted a recipe from Rosemary Gladstar's book, "Herbal Recipes for Vibrant Health", which I have enjoyed making and using fairly consistently. I hope you will try it too and keep a batch in your refrigerator to give your brain an ongoing and continuous boost. It makes a great alternative to sweet treats that often are devoid of any nutrients. Island Natural Market in Nanaimo and Heaven on Earth in Qualicum sell powdered herbs. Use carob rather than cocoa in the recipe if you are sensitive to caffeine.

Brain Bars

Ingredients:

- 1 cup tahini or other nut butter
- 1 cup honey
- 1 cup powdered ginkgo
- 1/2 cup powdered Siberian ginseng
- 1/2 cup powdered gotu kola
- 1/4 cup powdered goji berries
- 2 tablespoons powdered rosemary (pick fresh and let dry for a day or two before grinding)
- 1/4 cup carob or chocolate chips
- 1/4 cup coconut
- 1/4 cup goji berries and/or raisins
- 1/4 cup chopped almonds
- Carob or cocoa powder, about 2 tablespoons.

Method:

1. Mix 1 cup tahini and 1 cup honey (or to taste, may use less honey and more tahini).
2. Hopefully you have been able to buy powdered ginkgo, Siberian ginseng and gotu kola. If in leaf form, grind in a coffee grinder. Also grind goji berries. Combine the herbs and add to tahini/honey mixture to make a thick paste. You may need to add a tablespoon of honey if the paste is too dry.
3. Mix in whatever confections you prefer--carob or chocolate chips, coconut, goji berries and/or raisins, chopped almonds.
4. Add enough carob or cocoa powder to thicken into a dough.
5. Press into a glass dish, approximately 8" x 8", that you can keep in the refrigerator. This makes about fifty 3/4" x 3/4" x 1/2" deep bars. Cover dish with a lid, parchment paper or wax paper so that the bars will not dry out. They will keep for 2-3 months. Slice a bar for daily brain nourishment.