

White Willow Bark

by Karen Unruh

White Willow, *Salix alba*, has been used by herbalists for the treatment of inflammatory rheumatic conditions, painful muscles and joints, lumbago, sciatica, neuralgia and gout. What these conditions have in common is that inflammation has occurred for a reason and pain often results from this inflammation. An area of the body has become stressed – usually muscles and joints. I don't often suffer from this kind of pain, but for the couple of times that I have, the willow inner bark made into a decoction and drunk regularly has helped the area to heal.

Was I doing too strenuous a job cleaning up the garden, cutting wild growth back and hauling branches and leaves to our compost areas? Or was it sitting in the passenger side at the front of the car, listening and chatting for a day with three passengers in the back seat, twisting my head to hear better? What evolved was a stiff neck, sore when I tried to turn too far. So my analysis would be that I had stressed the area of my neck, and to protect the neck, inflammation has set in as a natural reaction to this injury. Pain can occur when I try to move my head to an extended turn sideways. This is not an infection as there is no rise in body temperature.

Time for some rest, heat and massage to the area, some gentle Yoga neck and shoulder stretches, and some White Willow Bark decoction to drink.

When I was participating in my herbal course with Don Ollsin in Victoria, we went on a herbal identification walk at one of the parks near the ocean in Saanich. One tree among many plants that day is the one I want to tell you about now. A large willow tree right at the park's parking lot had branches blown down due to strong winds the night before. Don was quick to tell us about Willow. White willow, in the mid 1800's was found to have salicylic acid concentrated in the inner bark. It is in other parts of the willow as well and can be tasted when one nibbles on the leaves. Salicylic acid is the ingredient in aspirin, so if you have tasted an aspirin, you will know the taste. Willow has been used by our First Nations' people for painful inflammatory conditions, so willows other than *Salix alba*, native to England, have this salicylic acid.

As several branches had blown down in the storm, Don suggested we take some home. We could do two things with these branches. First, prepare the inner bark to make a decoction, and second, root the branch and plant the branch where it could grow into a 'welcoming' tree – as that is the nature of willow – in a sunny but moist location in our gardens. A welcoming tree – that is why it was located at the edge of the trail and the parking lot at the Saanich Park! The willow we had was not the English *Salix alba*, but the local Pacific Willow, *Salix lucida* ssp. *lasiandra* with its green, slightly rounded, lance-shaped leaves with a white bloom on the undersides.

To prepare the bark for herbal use, one first strips off and discards the outer bark, using a vegetable peeler. Then the vegetable peeler is used to strip off and save the next inner layer of bark. As Don demonstrated this with his pocket knife, it reminded us of the xylem and phloem lessons of school science, where nutrients are moved throughout the tree. Of course this would be where you would

find the salicylic acid! – our memory reminds us. The inner bark can be used fresh or can be dried at warm room temperature for future use.

A decoction differs from an infusion or tea made from leaves or flowers where boiling water is poured over the aerial parts and the tea is allowed to steep for a time. The decoction is made from the bark, roots, or seeds of the plant, which are placed in a kettle or saucepan with cold water and brought to a low simmer and allowed to simmer for 10 to 15 minutes. The tougher plant surfaces need this stronger decoction method.

If a person is sensitive to aspirin, they would best not take this decoction.

Willow Bark Decoction

Place 4 tablespoons of dried willow inner bark and 4 cups of cold water in a saucepan. Bring to a simmer and simmer for 10 to 15 minutes. Strain out the liquid and sip the liquid warm or cool.

Take 1 cup three times a day.

I find that the bark can be used to make a second decoction.

And it works! My pain and the stiffness in my neck area are almost gone.



Willow leaves



Willow leaves – undersides



Shredded willow bark