

Ancient tree, modern medicine

The maidenhair tree is famed for its magical health-giving properties. Kathryn Marsden explains why

THE GINKGO biloba – or Maidenhair tree – kept company with dinosaurs when man and other mammals were but a twinkle in the eye of evolution. Archeological and botanical experts believe that it has existed longer than any other tree. Fossilised specimens have been dated at several million years old and are so perfect that *Ginkgo biloba* has earned itself the nickname 'the living fossil'. Throughout the world, there are some huge and healthy Ginkgo trees in cultivation, known to be at least 1000 years old.

Ginkgo has been used for centuries to treat a wide range of illnesses and now, like so many plants, has become an important medicine in modern man's fight against disease.

As we age, blood vessels narrow, circulation around the

body and to the brain slows down and essential nourishment carried via the bloodstream doesn't always reach its destination. Forgetfulness, poor concentration, confusion, cold hands and feet, depression, persistent tiredness, and irritability and lack of interest in life are all common symptoms.

Clinical trials have now demonstrated that the right quantity of *Ginkgo biloba* extract can help reduce these problems. In fact, the amount of research carried out into the effects of this very special plant are legion and studies certainly demonstrate that Ginkgo gets to the parts other nutrients cannot reach.

Scientists speak describes its active ingredients as having the power to strengthen cerebral function enfeebled by

age'. On a practical level that means the taking of Biloba supplements can help us to feel warmer, stepping the circulation up a notch or two so that gardening on colder days is less of a strain.

Ginkgo's effect on memory and recall may also help to reduce the number of times we walk into the potting shed or greenhouse and then forget what we went in there for! And because Biloba is able to improve the transport of oxygen and glucose to muscle and brain cells, we're likely to benefit from increased energy levels too; so useful when it comes to all that digging.

Perhaps even more important is Biloba's ability to help treat conditions such as Raynaud's disease and tinnitus, to lessen the likelihood of dangerous blood clots that can lead to stroke or

heart attack and reduce the risk of intermittent claudication – a painful circulatory disorder of the legs. Ginkgo also enhances the efficiency of brain signals and protects the body's cells and tissues against oxidative damage and premature aging.

Old and bold

IN SUMMER, the fan-shaped leaves of *Ginkgo biloba* are gloriously green, turning to golden-yellow in the autumn. The insect-repelling bark has a sheen which invites stroking.

Ginkgos can put on as many as 18 inches a year when first planted and their longevity means they are likely, in time, to reach great heights. However, growth slows right down as the tree reaches 25-30 years old.

A beautiful example in the grounds of one London hospital is said to be around 55 years old and has reached only 20ft. If you have the space to grow a Ginkgo, go for a male tree: Females produce smelly seeds.

Vegetable growers might like to know that root and leaf extracts of *G. biloba* are reputed to reduce damage done by the Cabbage White caterpillar.



Head all about

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