

Discovering the Energetics of our Local Herbs

By CoreyPine Shane, Holistic Clinical Herbalist

Part of the wonder and magic of Chinese medicine is the use of “energetics” to describe diseases and treatments. To describe energy in a quantifiable way that can be communicated and taught, many traditional cultures discussed disease as if it was weather. To people living close to the earth, talking about a problem as “hot” or “cold” makes as much intuitive sense as talking about how a hot summer will wilt their crops, or too much rain would drown their seedlings. They were simply using what was around them to describe what was within them.

Just as there is good reason why almost every traditional culture from China to India to Greece (and thus Europe) developed such a system, there is just as good reason for us to learn how to think this way. Learning to think about disease and treatment in terms of energetics helps us better understand the body’s imbalances, and at the same time how to treat those imbalances holistically.

The best way to begin understanding energetics is to simply imagine what it feels like to be in that climate. Heat and Cold are two good ones to start with. Instead of trying to memorize lists of symptoms, feel what “Heat” would feel like in your body.

What does it feel like to be outside on a hot summer day? You might feel hot and thirsty; maybe your exposed skin would turn red. A Heat condition, in turn, might manifest as a fever, redness in the face or skin, feelings of heat or burning sensations, thirst for cold fluids, and could include inflammation or infections. The person might be agitated and irritable, “hot-tempered” or “fiery.” Heat conditions tend to manifest as hyperactivity of the body and dilation of blood vessels.

A “Cold” disease, on the other hand, is usually one of under-activity, sometimes causing stagnation or congestion. Someone with a “cold” condition may appear pale and subdued, move slower, have little thirst, and feel chilly, even if they have a mild fever.

Of course, these are not descriptions of diseases in our western sense, but clusters of symptoms that form a pattern. And someone doesn’t have to have all these symptoms to have a condition – it’s the pattern you’re looking for. For example, one cannot say that diabetes is a hot or cold disease, or arthritis or a flu. What we are looking at is how this imbalance manifests in this particular individual, and that helps us personalize treatment and come closer to the best remedy for them. These are brief sketches of what can be complex ideas, so play with these ideas, see how they fit in your own body in health and disease.

Herbal Energetics

So now that we can speak the language of “energetics” we can figure out how to treat these conditions, generally by using an herb that has the opposite energy of the imbalance. For example, for an infection with heat, redness and pain, one can use antibiotic, Cold herbs such as Golden Seal (*Hydrastis canadensis*), Scute (*Scutellaria baicalensis*), or other Cold “heat-clearing” herbs.

Now any book on Chinese or Ayurvedic Herbalism will list the energetics of their herbs, but what if we want to use local herbs instead? After all, we live in a region rich with medicinal plants, one of the most botanically diverse areas in North America. And why not use what’s local instead of having to rely on medicines shipped from half a world away?

One of the easiest ways of discerning the energetic of an herb is by its taste. Taste is actually a very direct way of experiencing the pharmacology of a plant – certain strong alkaloids taste bitter, volatile oils have an aromatic taste, certain plant acids have a sour or astringent taste. Before there were labs, humans used their sense organs to understand and classify plant medicines. There are 5 main tastes – Pungent or Aromatic, Bitter, Sweet, Salty and Sour.

Herbs that have a pungent or aromatic taste to them are usually warming. These include spicy herbs like Cayenne, but also plants with strong aroma or taste like Cinnamon, Ginger, Fennel and many of our cooking spices. The stronger the flavor, the stronger the action. Local pungent herbs include Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*), Wild Ginger (*Asarum canadense*), and Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*). Pungent herbs stimulate circulation, disperse blocked or stuck energy, increase digestion, and dispel phlegm. A few of these herbs are actually cooling, like Peppermint and Cilantro.

Bitter herbs, on the other hand, are the coldest and are also drying. They are used to treat Heat and Dampness, such as sinusitis or other infections, as well as lowering fevers and lessening inflammation. Anyone who’s ever tried Golden Seal knows the taste of bitter. There aren’t a lot of American foods that are bitter except Dandelion greens and coffee, so the taste is under-used (traditionally, it’s important to have all 5 tastes in the diet). Bitters are an excellent digestive stimulant, but if used over a longer period of time need to be combined with some warming aromatic herbs. Otherwise, they may be too cooling.

The Sweet taste needs a little explanation. White sugar, honey and other intense sweeteners were not widely available until a century ago. So when Chinese medicine speaks of the sweet taste,

they are not talking about sugar, they are referring to a taste more like well-chewed grains, or sweet potatoes or winter squash; more of a subtle sweetness.

Sweet herbs are the tonics, the nourishing herbs that feed us in subtle but strong ways. Some local herbs are American Ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*), Solomon's Seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*), and the garden weed Common Mallow or Cheeses (*Malva sp.*). All are moistening and nourishing, but in different ways. Ginseng is more of an energy tonic, while Mallow (related to Marshmallow) and Solomon's Seal are great tonics for people with chronic fluid deficiency who are always thirsty and have dry chapped lips. Solomon's Seal is specific for arthritis in people with creaky joints.

Sour and salty herbs are less common in the herbal field. The taste of sour means like a lemon, and it can include astringent plants as well. Sour plants tend to be cooling, contracting and stop the excess flow of fluids out of the body. Many wild fruits such as blackberries are sour. So to a lesser extent are raspberries, strawberries, and apples. Medicinally, Raspberry leaf is used as a uterine tonic to tighten and tone the structure of the organ, while Hawthorn berries are used as a tonic to the heart and blood vessels.

Finally, when you think of salty herbs, think of mineral-rich plants. Seaweeds, of course, are a food with a long history of medicinal use, both as a nourishing food tonic and as a medicine. Kelp, for example, has been used for thyroid problems. Stinging Nettles (*Urtica dioica*) is a local herb that typifies the Salty taste. It is so mineral-rich that when the leaves are left to steep for several hours it tastes as rich as a broth. Nettles, along with Oatstraw (*Avena sativa*) have been used for anemia and blood deficiency, and for conditions like osteoporosis and broken bones to help rebuild.

By learning and experiencing the energetics of your body and of the herbs, you will begin to have a better understanding of the nature of disease as well as how to treat it. In the end, you'll find that energetics are not so foreign after all.

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