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HEALTH

HERBAL STRESS BUSTER?

BY ANNE UNDERWOOD

AS A SOVIET SOLDIER in Afghanistan in 1979, Zakir Ramazanov discovered a tonic that helped him reduce stress, while boosting mental and physical energy. It wasn't alcohol, but tea—made from the golden-yellow roots of a Siberian plant called *Rhodiola rosea*, which the Siberian soldiers received in their mothers' packages from home. Now a plant physiologist and president of National BioScience Corp. in Chester, N.Y., he is supplying extracts of the same root to U.S. supplement makers and researching its beneficial properties. "Given the frenetic pace of American life," he says, "America needs rhodiola."

Although rhodiola is just starting to create a buzz in this country, it has been used for centuries in Russia, Scandinavia and Iceland. Even the Vikings used it to enhance their endurance. But it was the Soviet Union in the 1960s that began seriously researching it—in part to maximize the performance of its Olympic athletes. Now the herb is poised to take off in the United States, with GNC rolling out Pinnacle's Rhodax nationwide. "It's got everything to become an herbal superstar—a high-safety profile, compelling benefits and a reasonable amount of scientific research," says Mark Blumenthal, executive director of the American Botanical Council.

Most of the studies on rhodiola have been Russian. But in recent years, West-



ILLUSTRATION BY JACK MOLLOY

ern journals have published some intriguing research showing improved performance in medical students during exams and physicians on night call after taking rhodiola. Next month the journal *Phytomedicine* will publish a trial by Georg Wikman at the Swedish Herbal Institute and Russian colleagues comparing 180 elite Russian cadets before and after routine night duty. Not surprisingly, the cadets were not as strong on abstract thought and memory tests at 4 a.m. as they

Rhodiola rosea
Extracts of the yellow root could prove golden for supplement makers. Research indicates that these products may help relieve stress while boosting mental and physical energy. Rhodiola may even help alleviate depression.

were when rested. But those on low and medium doses of rhodiola significantly outperformed those taking either a placebo or no pill at all. Scientists are still unraveling the clues to rhodiola's effects. But animal research indicates that it reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol, while optimizing levels of key brain chemicals involved in mood. It also appears to boost synthesis of a molecule known as adenosine triphosphate (ATP), which cells need to produce energy. "When you see

how it works, the effects make sense," says Dr. Richard Brown of Columbia University, who has given rhodiola to 300 patients for depression and other disorders. "It has no side effects that we've noticed—only side benefits."

Still, doctors note that more research is needed on long-term complications and adverse drug interactions. (So far none have been noted.) And they sound the standard warning that pregnant women should not try new herbs. Even doctors who are open to rhodiola caution that any benefits may be modest. Dr. Andrew Weil, perhaps the nation's leading herbal arbiter, has been taking rhodiola for six months and notes "increased energy, but nothing dramatic." Others may have no energy boost at all, if the real problem is a medical disorder such as an underactive thyroid.

Rhodiola also won't help if you buy a bad product. Reliable brands at present include Arctic Root, Rosavin, Rhodax, Clear Energy and Longevia, which cost \$20 to \$50 for a month's supply. Look for bottles that say *Rhodiola rosea*—not *Rhodiola sacra* or any other rhodiola species, as these lack the active rosavin compounds.

But such caveats cannot dampen the enthusiasm of radio host Liz Sterling of Boca Raton, Fla. After taking Longevia for two months, she says, "it's as if my shoulders have lowered, and stress just rolls off." We should all be so lucky.