

Ginger for Aches and Pains

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Since 2000, I have been interested in the use of ginger applied externally to the body. While the internal and external use of ginger has been an ancient herbal remedy in India and China for thousands of years, it is only in the last 30 years that its use has been recorded in the West, primarily as a result of experiences in European anthroposophic hospitals. The ginger compress is found to be effective for a number of conditions such as bronchial lung conditions, arthritis, and anxiety, while the ginger footbath has the potential to relieve sinusitis, headache and musculoskeletal tension. In the late autumn of 2009, I travelled to a small biodynamic farm that grows ginger in the north-east of Australia, where I spent three days living among rows of ginger plants, observing, drawing, photographing and eating the different parts of them. When I arrived at the farm, the first season's rhizomes were being prepared for the local farmers' market.

ginger characteristics

Zingiber officinale (ginger) comes from the zingiberaceae family, which has 1300 species, of which 80-90 are zingiber. *Zingiber officinale* is the only medicinal plant in the zingiberaceae family and is the one we most likely know for use as a spice. Ginger's rhizome is used both internally and externally for a variety of effects including anti-emetic and anti-inflammatory. Today, ginger rhizomes are grown widely for commercial use in warm, moist, tropical areas of Africa, Australia, China, India and Sri Lanka.

Ginger rhizomes are harvested when the leaves start to dry and contract in the late autumn. The rhizome is a spreading, bulbous stem that lies horizontally, close to the

surface, with knob-like carrying buds that develop into shoots or new rhizomes. The rounded, fresh buds are about the size of a knuckle, and are soft lemon-green with a fleck of pink in color. Each mother rhizome consists of thick, rounded, thumb-like protrusions, which are referred to as "hands" in herbal literature. The outer layer of a dried rhizome is soft beige, with a texture reminiscent of human skin, while the knob-like buds look like knuckles on the hand. The cut rhizome has a pungent aroma, smelling fresh and sweet, and when tasted it has a hot, sharp and awakening effect. Ginger is propagated each spring from stored rhizome stock of the previous year.

Ginger has long, milky-colored tap roots and smaller, fibrous roots. Within 30 days of the first shoot appearing, each adult plant grows between 10-14 stalks that are 1-1.5 metres long. Each stalk has about eight-10 leaves alternating up the stem. The lower leaves are small, dark and contracted close to the stem, while the

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middle and upper leaves reach toward the sunlight. In late autumn, flower stalks appear that are dwarfed by the canopy of large spreading leaves. The flower stalks grow barely 30 centimeters; while each leaf is at least 20 centimeters. The flowers erupt from a green, oval, cone-like form. Daily, the cones relax a petal to release a small, cream-colored flower bud that opens at dusk and is spent by dawn. The flowers are delicate, one centimeter across, orchid-like, with a distinct maroon-red tongue – these I chose not to eat!

ginger's unique gesture

Ginger has strong etheric forces of light, air, warmth and moisture and appears to be at odds with normal plant development. There is the suggestion of light, open levity above the earth, with darkened gravity, stability and warmth below the earth. Fresh, juicy leaves in open fashion, rhythmically spiral up the erect, hollow stalks and unfold gracefully in the sun. Light shines through the soft-green, triangular-formed leaves, which are large, widely spaced and reflect pale yellow at the tips. The upper leaves rise vertically towards the light, while the central leaves stretch out horizontally to allow maximum photosynthesis. At dusk, *copious sap* draws down from the leaves into the rhizome to rise back up into the flower stalks to enable the flowers to unfold. Ginger's warmth quality is seen in the rounded horizontal rhizome that grows close to the surface from which reproduction occurs, in the soft red color of the budding nodes and in the very hot taste of the rhizome juices. Like an upright cross, ginger rises vertically to the heavens and stabilizes deep in the earth, with leaves and rhizome reaching horizontally to balance.

ginger in European clinics

In European anthroposophic hospitals, external ginger applications in the form of compresses are reported as effective for chest, metabolic, arthritic and psychiatric conditions (Therkleson, 2007). The Filderlinik and Herdecke community hospitals, the Friedrich Husemann psychiatric clinic and the Paracelsus Krankenhaus in Germany, and the Ita Wegman and Lukas clinics in Switzerland all report positive results from ginger compresses applied over the kidney region. A ginger kidney compress is found to warm and enliven the metabolic forces of the body, with a corresponding positive effect on the will to be active and mobile. Monika Fingado (2012) in *Compresses and Therapeutic Applications* effectively describes the procedure for the ginger compress. In 2009, research was conducted in which a series of ginger compresses were

applied over the kidney region for people with osteoarthritis. Recipients reported experiences that were significant and positive (Therkleson, 2010). The ginger compress, when applied to the kidneys, is found to warm and relax tension in the body and soul, as well as activate an awakening of inner warmth, interest and enthusiasm towards the world and others.

the ginger footbath

The ginger footbath treatment evolved out of experiences in caring for children with sinusitis followed by two small experiential studies with nurses. The nurses described warmth penetrating through their body, activating a deep relaxation that enabled release of mental, emotional and physical tension. Thought life was enlivened, with an increased ability to concentrate and a sense of inner calm as bodily tensions loosened. These reported experiences were similar to those following the ginger kidney compress.

The ginger footbath is a simple therapy that could be used for a range of conditions such as: sinusitis, headache, flu-like symptoms and musculoskeletal tension. The following is an outline of the procedure:

A deep basin is filled with warm water and two teaspoons of ground ginger. The ground ginger is mixed with the hand, using a rhythmic lemniscate movement for about a minute to re-enliven the water.

The recipient sits in a relaxed position for the footbath, encompassed in a warm soft blanket/sheet that is large enough to wrap around the shoulders and reach to the floor.

The feet are placed in the footbath for 10 minutes, as long as the footbath is experienced as warm and comfortable, then dried well and warm socks put on. The recipient can rest a further 15 minutes if required.

summary

Ginger is the ideal plant to bring warmth, light, balance and a new lease on life to people. Both the ginger compress and footbath are very effective and convenient external applications that require minimal preparation and materials. The ginger compress requires a degree of experience and understanding, while the ginger footbath is a simple and useful adjunct to regular management of common debilitating conditions. 📖

Fingado, M., *Compresses and Therapeutic Applications* (T.T.S. Therklson, Trans.) Floris Books, Edinburgh, U.K. 2012.

Therkleson, T., *Nursing the Human Being: An Anthroposophic Perspective*, Mercury Press, New York, 2007.

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