



Taste



Definition

There are two aspects of taste in herbal medicine.

- **subjective taste in the mouth**
- **taste as a theoretical concept**

Taste as theoretical concept or 'herb property', relates to the effect that the herb has on the body, and this may or may not agree with the taste in the mouth.

For example, Panax ginseng is classified as sweet in Chinese medicine, referring to its property as a general tonic. But to most Westerners, it tastes bitter in the mouth not sweet.



Chinese taste categories

Two complementary concepts of taste occur in Chinese medicine:

- according to the Five Elements theory
- according to traditional classification of herbs by properties

The second classification is more common in Chinese herbal medicine, and includes the following 'taste' properties:

- **acrid**
- **aromatic**
- **bitter**
- **sour**
- **sweet**
- **bland**
- **salty**



Simplified taste system

I use a simplified taste system, based on the Chinese one above.

This includes five taste properties:

- **acid**
- **aromatic**
- **bitter**
- **sour**
- **bitter**

Just two of these properties, **bitter** and **sweet**, are briefly discussed in the following slides.



Bitter

Controversy

Bitter is the most controversial of the tastes.

Controversy arises because different traditions emphasize different aspects of the bitter taste property.

Three of the main traditions are:

- In the Chinese Five Element tradition, and in some Western traditions, bitter herbs may tonify the Heart
- In the Chinese system of classification of herbs by properties, **some** bitter herbs may drain Heat and Damp
- In the Western tradition, bitter herbs may stimulate the appetite and tonify digestion

**these three traditions are not mutually exclusive
but complementary**



Bitter and Cold

Some students of Chinese herbal medicine in the West think that all bitter herbs are contra-indicated for Deficient Cold Spleen patterns.

**it is not the bitter taste that is contraindicated,
but herbs that are cold in temperature**

Cold sweet herbs are contra-indicated for Deficient Cold Spleen patterns, but warm bitter herbs can be specifically indicated.

- It is the **temperature** that is important rather than the **taste**.



A new concept of the bitter taste

Regarding the bitter taste, the Western emphasis on **tonification** and the Chinese herbal emphasis on **reducing and cooling** seem to be irreconcilable opposites.

But they can be regarded as

just the two ends of a spectrum of bitter actions:

tonifies Qi-----moves Qi-----clears Heat

the action of moving Qi acts as the bridge

between tonifying Qi and clearing Heat



Six potential bitter actions

The table below shows six of the main potential actions of bitter herbs, together with some of their associated uses.

These six actions can be divided into two groups as follows:

tonic actions	cooling actions
general tonic	antimicrobial
digestive tonic	anti-inflammatory
hepatobiliary tonic	antipyretic

tonic actions are associated with:

- *tonifying Qi*
- *moving Qi*

cooling actions are associated with:

- *clearing Heat*
- *moving Qi*