

*HAWTHORNE, THE HEART BERRY

By Mike King

Hawthorne Berry (*Crataegus oxycantha*) is a common deciduous spiny tree that can grow up to 40 feet tall or a shrub that grows up to 5 feet tall on hillsides and in sunny wooded areas and lives to a great age. It is indigenous to all of Europe, the Mediterranean region, including northwest Africa and west and central Asia, and can now be found in many areas in North America. Because of its rapid growth, it has been found useful as a hedge for enclosing or dividing properties. Hawthorne is also found – sans the “e” spelled Hawthorn and is a member of the family Rosaceae or rose family.

In the spring hawthorn’s thorny branches sport beautiful red, pink or white flower clusters, which develop into small apple like fruit or berries. The berries, called haws, ripen to a bright red or even black in the fall. Hawthorn leaves are shiny and grow in a variety of shapes and sizes. Hawthorn wood is very hard and is valued for its lovely finish when made into objects, and for its high temperature when used as firewood. Actually, the genus name “Crataegus” comes from the Greek “kratos”, which refers to the hardness of the tree’s wood.

The History of the Hawthorn berry for medicinal purposes dates back to around 7000 B.C. As archeologists have found evidence that indicates ancient Chinese people used hawthorn berries to make a beverage that was medicinally and religiously significant. Throughout history, Hawthorn has had a reputation as a symbol of hope and even evil. In the first Century A.D. Dioscorides, an ancient Greek physician and philosopher wrote about its healthful properties in his *Materia Media* on plant medicines even before Hippocrates. The ancient Greeks and Romans viewed hawthorn as a symbol of love marriage, and fertility. In the Middle Ages it was hung over the doorway to prevent the entry of evil spirits. Christians used to regard the plant as sacred due to the legend that the crown of thorns worn by Jesus was made from its branches. In Celtic folklore, fairies are said to ‘hang out’ on hawthorn groves.

By the early 1800s, doctors recognized the herb’s medicinal properties and began using it to treat circulatory and respiratory diseases. The *New York Medical Journal* first published a report concerning the use of hawthorn berries in the treatment of heart disease in October 1896. A Dr. Green of Ennis, Ireland claimed to have a “cure” for heart disease. After his death it was revealed that the doctor was using an extract or concentrated form of hawthorn berry.

Hawthorn is considered a “cardio tonic” herb or heart tonic. Traditional medicine uses the flowers and or berries to treat irregular heartbeat (arrhythmia), high blood pressure, chest pain (angina), hardening of the arteries, congestive heart failure, and even heart failure. Hawthorn has been shown to reduce calcification of arterial plaques that lead to arteriosclerosis, the hardening and narrowing of the arteries. More recent uses include reducing water retention by expelling excess salt from the body, maintaining healthy cholesterol levels, as a strong anti-inflammatory, and aiding digestion. Hawthorn has also shown to be a mild tonic for the nervous system, which is an appropriate bonus considering that tension and stress can trigger cardiovascular problems. It can also be used as a powerful antioxidant and to support joint lining, collagen, and spinal discs.

The natural anti-inflammatories found in hawthorn are thought to reduce cancer risk and the risk of heart disease. Hawthorn berry extract has been shown to reduce ulcerative colitis due to its anti-inflammatory activity. The berry has also been shown to protect the liver from damage usually associated with cardiac events. After a heart attack the liver is usually impaired. Even though studies have been done on laboratory animals the exact reasons of the beneficial effects of hawthorn on the liver are unknown.

Although conventional medical doctors in the U.S. still do not widely use hawthorn, thousands of European doctors prescribe hawthorn to prevent cardiovascular disease or to prevent mild to moderate symptoms. Today, in the U.S., integrative doctors are relying on hawthorn more frequently. In fact, it is sometimes prescribed concurrently with digitalis-based drugs. Digitalis or digitoxin is a pharmaceutical derived from the herb foxglove, but has negative side effects. A new Meta study published in Jan 2008 in *MedPage Today* by Zalman S. Agus, MD from the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine taking data from 14 randomized placebo-controlled trials involving 1,110 patients supported hawthorn's use. The study stated "Hawthorn extract is safe and has significant benefits for patients with congestive heart failure."

Hawthorn is available in non-standardized and standardized capsules and liquid extracts, tinctures, and solid extracts. There is also a bitter tasting tea made for the dried hawthorn leaves, flowers, and berries. Dosages for the hawthorn berry can range from 25mg to 300mg with daily totals of up to 1800mg. Higher mega doses could create a significant drop in blood pressure or sedation. Hawthorn may potentiate the effects of some pharmaceutical heart medications and the gout medicine Sulfinpyrazon – consult with your qualified health care provider if this is the case and anytime you supplement.

Hawthorn is a rich source of nutrients. In addition to bioflavonoids (powerful plant metabolites), hawthorn contains cardio tonic amines, polyphenols, and is a source of vitamins C, B vitamins, and many other nutrients. Hawthorn may work slowly and like all herbal tonics may take up to three months for a full effect, although many find quick relief of cardiac symptoms. Hawthorn, as a tonic, can safely be taken for several years or longer without any negative effects.

**This information is for educational purposes only and is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease.*