

## The Practical Herbalist -- Watermelon

Watermelon is a food that provides a good lesson on how herbs affect the body. Watermelon has appeared in Chinese herbal medical texts since 1350 CE. As a herb, watermelon or xi gua (*shee goowa*) is considered cold in nature. This designation of “cold” is a reference to how this food affects the way a person feels. It is this type of description that forms the basis of traditional herbal medicine.

In traditional herbal medicines there is always a description of the dynamics of a patient's condition, and a description of how a herb will affect the patient. In the case of watermelon, we all know that during the summer, stores have pallet loads of watermelon. In the cold of winter, few people are buying watermelon. Despite the fact that stores can still get pallets of watermelon, they often just have one or two around. During the winter people generally don't want watermelon, they want cinnamon and hot apple cider.

Watermelon becomes appropriate when a person is hot. In the summer this is obvious, people feel hot, they are sweating or are red in the face. These are all “heat” signs. In this way watermelon can be helpful any time there are “heat signs” that need to be controlled.

Watermelon is the perfect medicine for treating and preventing heat stroke or heat exhaustion in the summer. Mixed with other cold herbs, watermelon is traditionally an important ingredient in treating mouth sores, sore throat, tooth infections and cavity pain. All of these conditions can be considered hot in nature. Other hot conditions such as burns, ulcerated sores, and ear infections can also be treated using watermelon based herbal formulas.

There is a famous formula called Watermelon Frost. It is made by packing a watermelon rind with salt. A “frost” forms on the rind which is scraped off and mixed with other cold herbs. This formula is used for many heat conditions, but is most often formed into flavored lozenges for relieving sore throat.

The idea of the favorite summer snack as a medicine may seem a bit strange. Foods and herbs, are defined as medicine by their use, not by what they are. Watermelon eaten as a snack, should be considered food. Watermelon used to “clear heat” and help a person recover from heat exhaustion, is a medicine. Like medicine (and most foods), overeating can have negative side effects. Too much watermelon can create an upset tight stomach and diarrhea. This would essentially be called a “cold stomach”. The medicine for that would be warm spices like ginger and or cinnamon.

The line between food and medicinal herbs is not distinct. Understanding how herbs work in the body can help us understand how our food affects us, and how to eat what our bodies need to stay healthy and in balance.

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