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882



Rhus toxicodendron, a study

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PHARMACOGNOSY

The name *Rhus toxicodendron* covers both poison ivy and poison oak. The latter is also known as *Rhus diversiloba* or *Toxicodendron quercifolium*, the leaves being oak-like, and is found on the Pacific coast of North America. Poison ivy on the other hand occurs on the east coast and is very common in Canada. It grows either as a shrub or as a woody vine, climbing by aerial rootlets. The climbing variety is also known as *Rhus radicans*.

It is an essentially restless plant, unwilling to stay put and stravaiging all over the countryside. Hence the liability of workers clearing the bush or berry pickers inadvertently coming in contact with the leaves to their subsequent sorrow. It is of note that a chief characteristic of the *Rhus tox.* drug picture is unease when at rest with the urge to get moving for relief.

Both poison ivy and poison oak are members of the Anacardiaceae or Sumac family, and it has been found that in provings they induce almost identical responses. The mother tincture is prepared from the leaves, freshly gathered just before the time of flowering, and preferably at or just after sunset on a cloudy, sultry day from plants growing in shady places. The tincture possesses a red colour, a somewhat astringent taste and a peculiar odour.

The distinguishing mark of poison ivy is the arrangement of its three leaflets. These form a triangle, the two leaflets at the base being almost sessile with very short stalks, whereas the third at the apex has quite a long stalk. Curiously enough, this leaf formation is also shared by *Ptelea trifoliata*, a small Rutaceous tree, commonly known as wafer ash or hop tree. The fruit, however, is quite different, being a cluster of papery seeds very reminiscent of the seeds of the wych-elm. Whereas the fruit of poison ivy is a cluster of small, round, smooth, white, or ivory-coloured, berries.

The flowers are small, five-petalled, greenish yellow, with a central golden cone of upright stamens, and bloom in June and July. They occur in a spike.

The leaves are placed alternately, supported on long petioles, their three dark green shining leaflets being about three inches long, ovate in shape, strongly veined, more or less downy on the under-surface. In the fall the foliage is dangerously attractive when the leaves take on vivid flaming red and crimson tints.

The root sends up a great many stems, which seldom grow erect but trail along the ground. They divide into slender woody branches, covered with a brown bark. The roots contain even more of the poisonous substance than any other part of the plant, and are just as dangerous in the depth of winter if contacted in the course of bush clearance or other activity.

Human sensitivity varies a great deal, as with other forms of allergic sensitivity to contact poisons. The horse, mule and goat can apparently eat the plant with impunity. The berries are eaten by birds.

PHARMACOLOGY

There has been much controversy as to which ingredient of the plant is responsible for its extreme toxicity. Investigation points to a polyhedric phenol, named by one worker *lobinol*, and by another *urushiol*, as the chief offender. One author states that "there are probably no other plants in existence which cause so much human distress and suffering as the four Toxicodendrons, all of which are responsible for so-called poison ivy dermatitis".

This seems a somewhat sweeping statement, but the symptoms of poisoning are certainly "no joke". They are succinctly described in a Canadian medical journal thus:

"After a period of twelve to forty-eight hours following contact the skin becomes red and itchy. A few hours later small papules are formed, close together, and cover the area touched by the plant. Later these become vesicles with colourless serum which does not contain the poisonous substance, for it is quite harmless when transferred to other parts of the body. The itching is intense.

Vesicles appear on the third day and last a week, then gradually dry up. In severe cases the skin is discoloured for a month, but the itching is usually gone in ten days from its first appearance."

Wheeler and Kenyon point out further that, "The vesicular eruption may spread to mucous membranes. Mouth and throat swell; nausea and vomiting appear, and irritative cough. Pains develop about the joints and great lumbar stiffness. Arms and legs become numb. Fever may be accompanied by delirium and mental confusion, and ends often with copious sweating. Urinary secretion is increased and diarrhoea is usual. Great general soreness and prostration are prominent symptoms."

Certainly a gamut of distress and suffering. Evidently the tissue affinities of this plant are extensive, namely: to sum up: with the *skin*, inducing an intense irritant dermatitis, characterized by itching, burning, swelling, erythema and vesication; with *lymphoid tissue* and various *glands*, e.g. the parotid, giving rise to inflammation and hypertrophy; with *the brain*, tending to depression and mental confusion; with *muscles and ligaments*, causing both pain and temporary paralysis; with *fascial and connective tissues*, giving rise to oedematous swelling and stiffness.

PHYSIOGNOMY

The sufferer needing this remedy may present a pale, sickly appearance with sunken eyes surrounded by blue rings, or the face may be suffused with a red flush with a flaming red nose. Sometimes the countenance is distorted, being drawn to one side or the other, and exhibits a furtive suspicious expression.

The patient is in obvious pain and distress, yet cannot stay still: keeps tossing and turning in bed, or will move restlessly about in search of relief if up.

The lips tend to become cracked and dry. The tongue also is dry and may be cracked or fissured, the cracks tending to gape and bleed. The tongue looks dark brown in colour, often with a triangular red area at the tip.

Herpetic eruptions are common, especially around the mouth and on the chin.

Movements tend to be awkward and clumsy. In fact stiffness and consequent lameness may produce a condition bordering on paralysis. This results in a reeling, staggering type of gait, suggestive of intoxication, with a tendency to swerve to the right. Actual tremors are apt to ensue in the limbs after active exertion.

PSYCHOLOGY

Extreme restlessness of spirit accompanies the physical unease, and this is accentuated at night. The sufferer cannot get unpleasant thoughts out of his head; gets very worried about the future, about his family, about his business; becomes depressed and despondent.

There may be actual confusion of thought, disinclination for any mental effort, forgetfulness of what he set out to do, even while doing it.

The mental anxiety may take the form of actual suspicion and fear of being poisoned, resulting in a refusal to take any medicine offered and a tendency to get out of bed at night in the attempt to escape.

There is frequently a desire for solitude, much weariness of life, sadness, with a tendency to "weep without knowing why". Fever is apt to be accompanied by actual stupor or muttering delirium.

PHYSIOLOGY

Great sensitivity to open air is noticeable, or to uncovering. Even putting a hand outside the bed-covers may bring on a fit of coughing.

Empty hunger may occur without any real appetite.

Desire for cold milk and sweets may be noted, also a dislike of meat and bread.

Notable is an unquenchable thirst for cold drinks, especially at night, but at the same time the drinking of cold fluids may increase the sensation of chilliness and may aggravate cough. The thirst is associated with dryness of mouth, tongue and throat.

Sleep is restless, patchy, disturbed, especially in the second half of the night. There is a tendency to dream of activities involving great exertion. Violent spasmodic yawning may occur.

Sweating may be a prominent feature. Sweats from pain; sweats even while sitting still; very persistent sweats, the perspiration acquiring an unpleasant odour; sweating accompanied by trembling; sweating at night in association with a pruritic miliary eruption; sweating as the result of taking a warm drink.

Modalities are of considerable importance. Symptoms are *aggravated* by cold, especially the combination of cold and wet; also by cold winds, in thunderstorms, and when rain is on the way. Again the symptoms are worse when at rest, sitting, lying or standing still. Pain is aggravated by the first movement after sitting still for a while, and again when activity which has given temporary relief has reached the point of fatigue. This results in a vicious circle, thus: unease at rest compelling movement→relief: continued movement→fatigue→fresh pain, compelling rest; rest→fresh unease and pain—.

Symptoms are also aggravated when lying on the right side, in the evening, especially about 7 pm and at night, particularly the second half of the night.

Relief is usually afforded by warmth and local hot applications, by warm dry weather, by wrapping up warmly. Movement also gives relief if not persisted in to the point of fatigue.

PATHOLOGY

General. Symptoms requiring this remedy are likely to be induced by getting wet, especially after being overheated; also by undue exertion, especially if muscle groups are involved in some form of unaccustomed activity. Another ætiological factor may be stress due to undergoing a surgical operation.

Pains are described as shooting or tearing, or perhaps as a dull gnawing or

burning ache, when at rest—the “rheumatic” type of pain. Pains tend to be worse when resting, resulting in an irresistible urge to shift position or get up and move about in search of relief.

Pains are commonly accompanied by a sensation of stiffness, which is also relieved temporarily by movement, but worse after a period of inactivity. The first movement after rest is usually quite painful.

Muscular weakness is also a prominent feature, and may be associated with a feeling of numbness.

Fever is accompanied by a sensation of chilliness; the chill often starts in one lower limb, perhaps in the thigh, or it is first noticed in the dorsum between the shoulder-blades; it causes fits of shivering with a feeling as if “plunged into a bath of cold water”.

Head. The peculiar feeling of giddiness associated with this remedy is noticed on rising from the lying posture, and is a sensation as if one would fall over, either forwards or backwards.

Headaches of great variety are described under *Rhus tox.* in the literature, as well as a dull stupid feeling in this region. A frontal headache is mentioned, worse from cold and aggravated by every step when walking, as also by shaking the head. The headache may be accompanied by a curious sensation as if the brain was loose and swashing about inside the skull.

A severe occipital headache may occur, relieved by warmth and also by bending the head backwards—a headache modality shared by *Belladonna*, *Cactus*, *Chamomilla* and *Hepar sulph.*

The *Rhus tox.* headache is apt to recur at the least feeling of chagrin or frustration. It is often accompanied by extreme sensitivity of the scalp. Furthermore the sufferer on stooping down feels unable to straighten up again.

Mention is also made under this remedy of a migraine-type headache which is relieved by taking a long walk out of doors.

Moist itching eruptions may occur on the scalp with the formation of thick crusts and the presence of an offensive odour.

Eyes. Eye conditions calling for this remedy are acute and severe, such as acute swelling of lids; chemosis; orbital cellulitis; ptosis; suppurative iritis. Soreness of the eyeballs is marked, with stiffness of the lids which stick together at night. Corneal ulcer may occur with marked photophobia. Styes and profuse lachrymation are also mentioned

Ears. A peculiar sensation may be complained of as if “wind was blowing into the ear”. In the case of otitis media the pus is likely to be blood-stained.

Respiratory System. A severe type of nasal coryza is worse on first rising in the morning, is accompanied by much sneezing, violent in character, and associated with a tendency to epistaxis of dark coloured blood.

Hoarseness is noticed on attempting to sing, but perseverance in the attempt results in improvement. This is in distinction from the hoarseness associated with *Arun triphyllum*. In the latter case persistence in the attempt to use the voice results in complete aphonia.

A dry teasing cough resulting from a tickle behind the upper part of the sternum is apt to occur with shivering or as the result of putting a hand outside the bed-covers. It is associated with a raw, scraped sensation in the air passages, and often with the taste of blood in the mouth.

Much hawking of mucus with a salty taste is common. Coughing hurts the chest and may also cause a "shattering" type of headache. It is aggravated by contact with cold air. The sputum may be rust-coloured.

Asthma, when the attacks alternate with herpes labialis, may require this remedy.

Alimentary System. The remedy may be indicated in affections of the temporo-maxillary joint, easy dislocation of the lower jaw, arthritis accompanied by the constant desire to yawn (in order to move the tissues around the joint in search of relief). Cracking in the joint when chewing.

Ulcers occur at the corners of the mouth. Lips and mouth are very dry and the lips often cracked. The tongue is dry and sore, coated white or brown, with a red triangular area at the tip. A bitter or putrid taste may be present and in place of dryness the secretion of much viscid saliva.

Aberrations of appetite may be experienced—anorexia with repugnance to food; empty hunger without any relish for food; bouts of ravenous hunger passing off after sitting for a while; nausea and vomiting associated with loss of appetite. "Fulness" and "weight" may be noticed in the epigastrium after meals.

Severe colicky pains in the belly are relieved by bending double or by moving about. The remedy may be called for in inflammatory conditions in the abdomen, also in Typhoid fever marked by great restlessness and mild delirium, the symptoms being much worse at night. Involuntary stools are accompanied by extreme exhaustion.

With dysentery, tenesmus is marked, with tearing pains in the thighs during passage of stools; there is often also a craving for cold milk.

Chronic painless morning diarrhoea may require this remedy, the stools being brick-red or brown in colour and very foul-smelling.

Cardio-vascular System. Dilatation of the heart accompanied by palpitation, distress and trembling when sitting still may call for the remedy, especially when the symptoms are aggravated by over-exertion, and perhaps associated with a feeling of numbness in the left shoulder and arm. It may be indicated when cardiac hypertrophy has resulted from over-strain.

Lymphatic and Glandular System. Inflammation and enlargement of lymph nodes, of the parotid or the submaxillary salivary glands, possibly with suppuration, is a frequent indication for this remedy.

Genital System. An inflammatory dermatitis of erysipeloid type is especially likely to involve the scrotum and external genitalia, accompanied by much oedema and severe itching.

Urinary System. A sphere of usefulness here is in relation to postoperative retention of urine from paresis of the bladder. Bladder symptoms resulting from getting soaked in the wet may need the remedy. It has on occasion proved of value in connection with nocturnal enuresis in children.

Locomotor System. Here the remedy is of paramount worth, and has proved its value in conditions such as the following:

Strains and sprains from muscular stress, especially in the performance of some unusual activity, or from sudden violent movement.

Low back pain, pain between the shoulder-blades on dry swallowing, stiff neck the pain being of jerking or tearing character, worse in the morning and on first movement. As mentioned before the pains tend to be relieved by movement but only for a time, recurring with fatigue.

Stiffness of severe degree is a marked concomitant of the pains and shares in the same modalities, relief from warmth and from movement for a time.

A further feature is weakness accompanied by trembling in the limbs following excessive exertion; this may almost reach the pitch of paralysis, and the limbs feel inordinately heavy. Almost complete temporary paralysis may ensue after severe exposure to cold and wet.

A sticking drawing pain in the left arm has been described, extending to the finger tips. Also paræsthesia—pins and needles—felt in the tips of the fingers, especially on grasping an object. This is presumably a form of compression neuritis.

Also mentioned are: tingling pain in the shin bones, curiously made worse by warmth; hot, painful swollen joints; "rheumatic gout" in the big toe joints; shooting pains in tendons and ligaments; left-sided sciatic pain.

Skin. The drug picture of this remedy naturally enough shows a variety of skin affections.

Acute severe conditions of erysipeloid, vesicular, even bullous, types associated with much œdema. When there is involvement of the face the sufferer may be rendered unrecognizable.

Eruptions tend to itch and burn, especially at night and if exposed to heat or warmth in any form; scratching is compulsive but affords little relief.

Eruptions may be pustular, or raw and weeping, or possibly covered with thick crusts and oozing offensive discharge. Again they may show periodic exacerbation, perhaps recurring every Spring.

The remedy is of value in some cases of Herpes Zoster.

PHYSIOLOGY

A survey of the above symptoms will show that *Rhus tox.* has a very wide range of usefulness. A complementary remedy is *Bryonia*, but it should be noted that *Apis mellifica*, which has some somewhat similar symptoms, should not be given in immediate sequence, either before or after *Rhus tox.*

In obdurate cases where the remedy, although apparently indicated, does not give the desired result, *Radium brom.* has been found of value.

The remedy is called for in low fevers when stupor and delirium are mild but very persistent and restlessness is a prominent feature.

Tuberculinum is often called for as an inter-current remedy in *Rhus* cases.

With regard to actual poison ivy poisoning, if contact is known to have taken place the first measure is to wash the parts involved promptly, or within the hour, by thorough scrubbing with laundry soap lather. The scrubbing can be followed by rubbing with 65% alcohol.

If the condition has developed various remedies have been found useful, notably *Rhus tox.* (30 c or higher—one authority gives the 10 M), *Croton tiglium*, *Grindelia robusta*, *Sepia*. Crude preparations of *Rhus* only make things worse and should never be used.

Ruta graveolens, a study

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PHARMACOGNOSY

This remedy is prepared from rue, a plant well known as a medicinal herb from ancient times. It is a striking-looking plant with its grey-green somewhat glaucous foliage and its four-petalled bright yellow flowers in their cup-shaped calices, which persist after the blooms have withered.

The four flower petals are wide apart giving the bloom a rather untidy appearance, and the flower heads are arranged in a raceme of umbellate type. The stamens are interesting, numbering ten in the first flower of the group and eight in the others, inasmuch as their anthers move in turn to the pistil, shed their pollen and then retire.

The stem is woody at the base; the leaves, appearing alternately on the stem, are so deeply subdivided as to give an almost reticulate look. The plant prefers a dry, shady location and definitely does not like cold and wet.

It possesses a strong, not very pleasant scent, and a bitter taste—"Sour herb of grace" as Shakespeare calls it in *Richard III*. This name, Herb of Grace, may derive from the fact that a bunch of rue was commonly used by the priests in ritual sprinklings.

In Pliny's day rue was popularly supposed to be a cure for no fewer than eighty-four maladies. It was thought to make a warrior invulnerable if he heated his sword-point in the fire and then smeared it with the juice of the plant. It was also held to nullify poisons, and the *Speculum Mundi* has this to say of its properties, "Excellent is that medicine approved of Mithridates, King of Pontus, in Asia, viz. that if any do eat fasting two drie walnuts, as many figs, and twenty leaves of rue, with one grain of salt, nothing which is venomous may that day hurt him."

It was formerly used as a remedy against the plague, and Gerard avers that "the leaves of rue eaten with the kernels of walnuts or figs, stamped together and made into a masse or paste, is good against all evil aires, the pestilence or plague".

This may link up with the property of the plant to inhibit the activities of fleas, lice and other insects, which gave rise to the practice of placing a bunch of rue on the judge's bench and strewing the plant on the floor of the courtroom at the Assizes as a prophylactic against gaol fever, typhus, a louse-borne disease.

The association of the herb with visual acuity was formerly recognized and it was frequently consumed in salads by painters to strengthen and improve their sight. One writer, Swan, has this to say, "For those who are feeble in their sight, let them distill rue and white roses together, and putting the water thereof into their eies, it will open their windows and let in more light."

Culpepper recommended the herb for sciatica and pains in joints. In more recent times the essential principle of the plant, rutin, a yellow crystalline substance, has been isolated and has had a certain vogue in the treatment of

hypertension. Medicinal preparations are made also from the whole plant gathered before the flowers have developed.

PHARMACOLOGY

The name Herb of Grace is in contradistinction to that of poison ivy, yet this latter plant, *Rhus toxicodendron*, has many symptoms in common with *Ruta*. Although the reputation of rue was benign and medical rather than toxic, the plant if much handled has been known to cause "redness, swelling and vesication of the skin". Further in a number of instances where rue was administered with a view to procuring abortion definite toxic effects were induced, namely, "epigastric pain, violent and persistent vomiting, swelling of tongue, salivation, colic, fever, thirst, staggering gait, muscular twitching and spasms, vertigo, disturbances of vision, drowsiness, and after an interval of some days miscarriage". Quite a list!

From such evidence and from planned provings it appears that the tissue affinities of the plant are mainly with the *eyes*, especially the ocular muscles, with *muscles* and *tendons*, especially those of flexor muscles, with the *rectum* and with *skin*.

It is the synovial sheaths of tendons which are chiefly affected and the sites of insertion into the periosteum. The joints mainly involved are wrists, knees and ankles, wherein lies a difference from *Rhus tox.* which has special affinity with the lumbo-sacral region, the larger joints and fibrous tissue all over the body. Inflammatory changes are produced leading to pain and stiffness.

PHYSIOGNOMY

There are no special facial appearances associated with this remedy, but the eyes may look tired, red and watery. Sometimes a red rash is present on the forehead or pimples are seen on the lips.

There is evidence of restlessness and inability to sit still for any length of time, but on getting up from a chair there is a tendency to flop back again at the first attempt. This is due to a feeling as if the knees would give way. Even after rising at a further attempt the limbs feel stiff and the gait is unsteady and staggering.

PSYCHOLOGY

Restlessness of mind is accompanied by feelings of anxiety, as from a troubled conscience. There is a marked tendency to peevishness with the inclination to contradict and pick a quarrel. Despondency may afflict, especially at dusk, and possibly with a disposition to weep over recent actions or occurrences, tears of aggravation rather than repentance.

PHYSIOLOGY

Feels the cold and wants warmth; indoors preferred to outside. Chilliness may affect hands and feet or be felt all over.

Poor appetite; easy satiety or anorexia. Thirst is insatiable, and for ice-cold water.

Is drowsy after meals, but liable to frequent waking at night, disturbed by vivid confused dreams, or a feeling as if it was time to get up.

Yawning is frequent with desire to stretch the limbs.

With regard to *modalities* there is aggravation from cold and wet, when at

rest, when lying down or lying on the painful part. The symptoms are also worse when walking out of doors. This is different from *Rhus tox.* which shows relief when walking out of doors, until fatigue sets in. *Ruta* symptoms are also aggravated by looking fixedly at an object, by touch, by stooping, and as the result of eating raw food. Some relief is obtained by warmth and by moving about *indoors*.

PATHOLOGY

General. The *Ruta* pains are associated with weariness rather than weakness, and lack the paralysed feeling which often accompanies the *Rhus tox.* type of pain. With *Ruta* a bruised or beaten-up or strained sensation is experienced. Sometimes pain is described as located to one small spot, as if a nail were driven in. Often there is great unease of the limbs, especially the lower limbs, "does not know where to put them for relief".

Head. Various head symptoms are recorded, mainly of persistent dulness or heaviness, with confusion of thought. Giddiness on first rising in the morning, with need to clutch something for support, or perhaps while walking in the open air.

Eyes. This is an important sphere for the therapeutic action of *Ruta*. It relieves eye-strain resulting in pain in the eye when reading or doing fine work of any kind. Blurring of vision also ensues with a sensation of heat and burning, rendered worse by using the eyes and also worse in the evening.

Other eye symptoms are lachrymation, twitching of the lower lids, itching at the inner canthus and of the lower lid, and a green halo seen round an artificial light. Rubbing the eye leads to smarting and watering.

Ears. A prover noticed a feeling as if a blunt piece of wood were being pushed into the ear; another felt a pain below the mastoid process as from a blow or contusion.

Respiratory System. Gnawing pains or stitching pains may be felt in the chest, often increased by walking upstairs. These may be due to soreness at the insertions of the muscles of the thorax.

A cough is described, worse on lying down at night, and associated with copious, thick yellow sputum. Pain may be felt in the sternum.

Alimentary System. A variety of abdominal symptoms are recorded, mainly pinchings and gnawing sensation, especially affecting the hypogastrium. Pains in the stomach are relieved by taking milk.

The rectal symptoms would appear to be more important, namely stitching and tearing pains in the rectum, especially noticed when sitting still. Anal prolapse, piles, rectal stricture are also mentioned, often associated with a constant urge to stool and the passage of quite soft fæces.

Urinary System. A tearing sensation may be felt in the urethra, quite apart from urinating. Constant urge to empty the bladder may be accompanied by difficulty in relaxing the sphincter if opportunity is delayed.

Poor sphincter control may result in nocturnal enuresis or involuntary urination in the daytime, especially when walking.

Locomotor System. This is the main sphere of usefulness of the remedy. Pains up and down the spine or in the paraspinal muscles, usually of a bruised-feeling type and worse when sitting. Low back pain, however, may be relieved by lying on the back.

Tenderness in the muscles or at the point of tendon insertion into periosteum. This is often the result of oft-repeated occupational strain rather than of a single injury, e.g. tennis elbow.

Joints feel weak and knees tend to "give" on rising from sitting or when going up or down steps. Painful wrists, knuckles, knees and ankles with or without associated swelling.

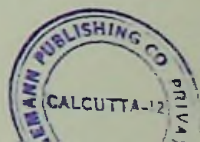
Contractures of tendons, especially flexors, occur with limitation of movement in fingers and toes, accompanied by stiffness. Fibrous bands or nodules may develop in hands and feet. Sciatic pain is associated with a desire to walk up and down for relief, the pain being worse when sitting or lying. The thighs, on one aspect or another, may feel bruised and be painful to the touch; this may make walking difficult and the gait unsteady.

Skin. The chief symptoms here is a tendency to generalized itching with relief from scratching. Despite relief at the site actually scratched the itching tends to start up in another site.

POSODOGY

This remedy is not so generally useful as *Rhus tox.* but it is of special value in relation to the ill-effects of over-strain of muscles and trauma, often unsuspected, at tendon insertions. This may be the result of postural or occupational stress, oft repeated, and tending to inflammation or fibrosis. Areas affected may be the shoulder region, elbows, wrists, and the anterior aspect of the upper part of the tibia, also the palms of the hands. *Ruta* has proved of value in relation to ganglion.

Complementary remedies are *Calcarea phosphorica* and *Silica*.





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