

Piper methysticum - Kava Kava

- Piperaceae - South Pacific, Hawaii

Kava Kava is also known by the names Ava, Ava Pepper, Intoxicating Pepper, Kawa Awa, Kawa Kawa, Wati, Yogona, and Waka. This herb, a member of the pepper family, grows as a bush in the South Pacific.

Explorer Captain James Cook, who gave this plant the botanical name of "intoxicating pepper", first discovered Kava Kava. Kava has been used for over 3,000 years for its medicinal effects as a sedative, muscle relaxant, diuretic, and as a remedy for nervousness and insomnia. The rhizome (root stock) is used medicinally. This botanical marvel has been used in parts of the Pacific at traditional social gatherings as a relaxant, and in cultural & religious ceremonies to achieve a "higher level of consciousness".

The roots can be made into a mildly narcotic beverage that is comparable to popular cocktails in Western culture. Kava is used ceremoniously in the South Pacific to celebrate beginnings and endings, such as marriages, birth and death. It is often used to honor a guest, to enhance communication, and even to help in settling disputes and sealing business agreements.

In Germany, Kava Kava is used as a nonprescription drug to reduce anxiety. Kava was first mentioned in scientific records in 1886, and it is gaining popularity in the US for its relaxing effects. More recently, Kava Kava has also gained popularity with the natives of Hawaii, Australia and New Guinea where it is used medicinally as well as recreationally.

Kava also is effective as a pain reliever and can be used instead of aspirin, acetaminophen and ibuprofen. Recent clinical studies have shown that the herb Kava is a safe, non-addictive anti-anxiety medicine, and as effective as prescription anxiety agents containing benzodiazepines such as Valium®.

While benzodiazepines tend to promote lethargy and mental impairment, Kava has been shown to improve concentration, memory, and reaction time for people suffering from anxiety. Kava has been clinically demonstrated as a means of achieving a state of relaxation without the adverse side effects.

In a 1996 randomized, placebo-controlled, double-blind study, two groups of 29 patients with anxiety syndromes were treated with 100 mg of Kava extract standardized to 70- percent kavalactones three times a day for four weeks. The symptoms of anxiety were significantly reduced in patients taking Kava as compared to placebo. No adverse reactions were observed in the Kava group.

In a 1997 multicenter, randomized, placebo-controlled study, a total of 101 outpatients were given one capsule of a Kava extract containing 70 mg of kavalactones or placebo three times daily. In this twenty-five-week study, all the patients suffered from moderate to severe anxiety, including agoraphobia, generalized anxiety disorder, specific phobia, and social phobia. The results showed that the short- and long-term effectiveness of Kava was superior to that of placebo. After twenty-four weeks, over half of the Kava group were rated as "very improved" whereby anxiety, fear, tension, and insomnia decreased steadily with treatment. Kava was well tolerated, and adverse reactions were mild and rare. The researchers concluded that Kava

was a treatment alternative to both benzodiazepines and synthetic antidepressants for anxiety disorders.

TRADITIONAL PREPARATION: There has been no reported shamanistic use for this plant, but it is an important plant for other reasons, so we have included it here.