The Viburnums – a Differential
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In contemporary North American herbalism, *Viburnum opulus* (Cramp bark) and *V. prunifolium* (Black Haw) are often used interchangeably for menstrual cramps, or combined in formula. Nineteenth century physician-level herbalists did not consider them interchangeable, and made critical distinctions between them. The Physiomedicalists and Eclectics both described *V. opulus* primarily as an antispasmodic primarily used for uterine spasm. Cook and Lyle attribute to it a broader influence on the nervous system. Cook, Lyle, and Ellingwood each distinguish *V. opulus* as a tonic and astringent. The indications are uterine weakness, prolapse, chronic leucorrhea, passive menorrhagia, and dysmenorrhoea due to debility.

We recently performed an experimental proving on these two remedies at the North American Institute of Medical Herbalism, and found results consistent with the traditional indications described above.

In a double-blind challenge, nine students took ten drops of *V. opulus* tincture and eight took the same dose of *V. prunifolium*. The method of assessment was through traditional pulse diagnosis and observation of the subjective effect on muscle and nervous tone. All seventeen students noted a small to moderate sensation of relaxation of the muscles. The students, who had all previously received introductory training in traditional Chinese pulse diagnosis, observed the depth of the pulse, its strength, and its shape, according to traditional standards.

After a period of ten minutes, in the *V. opulus* group, eight of the nine participants stated that the herb created either a reduction of tension in the pulse, or a slight sinking effect. In the *V. prunifolium* group, all eight participants stated that the either the tension in the pulse increased or that it became more elevated. Those who initially had a sunken pulse were most likely to state that it elevated the pulse depth to normal. This differences in the pulse appeared at the ten minute reading.

Both these herbs may be beneficial for menstrual cramps, but they are at opposite poles in overall influence. *V. opulus* relaxes tension in the entire system, and may be used for cramping of any of the smooth muscles, for intestinal colic, gall bladder spasm, cough, or spasm secondary to kidney stones. It combines well with *Dioscorea villosa* and/or *Lobelia inflata*, with other organ-specific remedies to direct its action. *V. prunifolium* may benefit some cases of menstrual cramps, when there is deficiency, but it is primarily tonic and astringent, not relaxant, to the system. It is of no value in intestinal, bilious, or renal colic. Notable indications are prolapsed uterus and leucorrhea, with debility, or it may be used as a general tonic in debility of the system as a whole.

**REFERENCES**


Lyle, T.J. Physio-Medical Therapeutics, Materia Medica and Pharmacy. 1897 http://www.herbaltherapeutic.s.net/Physio-MedicalTherapeutics.pdf
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