MACA

Sex Plant of the Inca

The South American country of Peru is one of the most diverse nations in the world in plant life, with a rich tradition of botanical medicine. From one of the least-travelled parts of Peru—the Central Highlands—a previously little known radish-like tuber used for sexual enhancement by the Inca is gaining in popularity. That plant is Maca.

Dubbed by the Miami Herald as "Peru's natural Viagra," maca has long been reputed to increase strength, energy, stamina, libido and sexual function, a winning combination of health benefits if there ever was one. During the height of the Incan empire, Incan warriors reputedly consumed maca before entering battle, to increase their strength. But after conquering a city the Incan soldiers were prohibited from using maca, to protect the conquered women from their powerful sexual impulses. Thus from as far back as 500 years ago, maca's reputation for enhancing strength, libido and fertility was already well established in Peru. Today, as researchers and physicians explore both the phytochemistry and biological activity of the plant, historical claims made for maca appear to be true.

MACA'S SEX EFFECTS DISCOVERED
Maca (Lepidium meyenii) is believed to have been cultivated in the Junin plateau of Peru's central highlands as far back as 2,000 years ago. When Spanish conquistadores ventured into the high altitude of Peru's central highlands in the early 1500s, there were no grasslands for grazing and the oxygen-thin air caused a precipitous drop in the fertility of their animals. The Inca recommended that the Spanish feed their horses the radish-like maca. When the Spanish followed this advice, the fertility of their animals returned to normal. Modern studies have confirmed this fertility-enhancing effect, showing that when maca is fed to animals, their sperm count, number of pregnancies and birthweights increase.

The Inca considered maca to be a gift from the gods, while today's consumers consider maca a boon to sexual vitality. In my own interviews with maca users in Peru, their primary reason for consuming maca is to increase libido and enhance sexual stamina. Maca is becoming increasingly popular in Peru among native and non-native people, and the effects of maca are creating market demand in Japan, Europe and the United States. Maca cultivation is on the increase and a number of government experts and agencies are actively promoting maca agriculture and development. Minister of Agriculture Belsario de las Casas is an enthusiastic maca supporter and user, "I take maca and can attest to its invigorating powers," he said.

MACA, THE NUTRITIOUS TUBER
In the Peruvian highlands maca is a nutritious food and markers feature a plethora of maca products including whole maca, maca flour for baking, maca baked goods, maca blender drinks, a fresh, fermented drink called maca chicha and distilled maca liquor. Analysis of maca shows that dried maca weighs in at about 59 percent carbohydrate and has a protein value of slightly more than 10 percent. It has a higher lipid content than other root crops at 2.2 percent, of which linoleic acid, palmitic acid and oleic acid are the primary fatty acids, respectively. Maca is also a rich source of sterols, including sitosterol, campestrol, ergosterol, brassicasterol and ergostadienol. From a mineral standpoint, maca exceeds both potatoes and carrots in value and is a good source of iron, magnesium, calcium, potassium and iodine.

AGENTS OF DESIRE
What compounds in maca promote its reputed sex-enhancing effects? The plant sterols listed may be influential, as may be benzyl thiocyanate and p-methoxybenzyl isothiocyanate discovered in the root. But two groups of novel compounds, recently discovered in maca root by Dr. Qun Yi Zheng and his team of chemists at PureWorld Botanicals, appear to be active in the plant's sexual enhancement. To unlock

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maca's chemical secrets, the scientists conducted the most comprehensive analysis of maca ever performed, and discovered several previously unknown compounds in the plant subsequently named macamides and the macaenes.

To test whether the macaenes and macamides were responsible for maca's sex enhancing effects, Dr. Zheng and his team developed two standardized extracts of maca, both with specific levels of the two groups of compounds. One extract was more concentrated than the other. In experiments conducted at the Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine, animals fed the standardized MacaPure extract demonstrated significantly increased energy and stamina and exhibited a marked increase in sexual activity as compared with non-maca-fed animals. The greater the concentration of macamides and macaenes, the more significant were the effects. Results of this study were sufficiently impressive to garner publication in the April 2000 issue of the peer-reviewed medical journal Urology.

PHYSICIANS COMMENT ON MACA
As maca has become increasingly popular, its use has spread to medical practices. A number of Peruvian physicians have turned to maca as an aid to sexual potency. Dr. Hugo Malaspina, a cardiologist practicing complementary medicine in Lima, Peru, first found out about maca through a group of sexually active older men who were taking the herb with good results. "One of this group started taking maca and found he was able to perform satisfactorily in a sexual relationship with a lady friend. I have several of these men as patients, and their improvement prompted me to find out more about maca and begin recommending it to my other patients."

Another Lima physician, Dr. Agula Calderon, is the former dean of the faculty of human medicine at the National University of Federico Villarreal in Lima. He comments on maca's uses due to its mineral value. "Maca has a lot of easily absorbable calcium in it, plus magnesium, and a fair amount of silica, which we are finding very useful in treating the decalcification of bones in children and adults." In his practice, Dr. Calderon uses maca for male impotence, erectile dysfunction, menopausal symptoms and general fatigue.

Chicago physician, Gary F. Gordon, former president of the American College for Advancement in Medicine, is also a maca supporter. "Using this Peruvian root myself, I personally experienced a significant improvement in erectile tissue response," he states. "I call it nature's answer to Viagra. It can certainly take more. MacaPure, a standardized extract of maca, is more concentrated. One to two grams of the extract daily should be sufficient to promote increased energy and libido. Powdered maca in bulk form is also available. If you make blender drinks with powdered maca, throw in a tablespoon."

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