Apple

Malus species

Everyone knows the saying about an apple a day, and there’s certainly truth in that. The apple is part of the large and diverse rose family, and as such is moderately astringent (JARFA). Apple trees as we know them are the descendants of the European crabapple and a variety of wild apple native to Asia. They were cultivated there for many years and brought to North America by colonists in the 17th century. Of course, most varieties have been bred over the years to increase their sweetness, and many consider the wilder, more sour and astringent varieties to be stronger medicine.

The apple fruit is rich in nutrients, fiber, and antioxidants (eat the skin!). They are classically prescribed to relieve both diarrhea and constipation. Eating a raw apple cleans the teeth and tones the gums. The grated pulp makes a good poultice for bites, swellings, and bruises. Similarly, the roasted and mashed fruit has been traditionally applied warm to the eyelids to ease strain and inflammation. Apples contain malic and tartaric acid which, through a complex metabolic process, actually reduce acidity in the body. For this reason they are considered helpful preventing “gravel” (urinary calculi) and treating gout. Speaking of gout, apple cider vinegar applied as a compress is said to bring great relief. As an alkalizing agent, apples are beneficial to the liver, and supportive in cases of bacterial or yeast infections.

The inner bark is the most astringent part of the tree, and as such is useful in addressing problems of a damp or secretory nature. A tea, tincture, or syrup made from this is a folk remedy for heartburn and “sour stomach;” not only does it act as an antacid, but it helps to tone the sphincter separating the stomach (and the acid it contains) from the esophagus. It will also be beneficial during a bout of diarrhea, as an astringent and also a mild anti-inflammatory. Apple water, made by gently simmering the fruit, bark, or both, is traditionally drunk cold to bring down a fever. A decoction of the bark, leaves, and/or twigs, especially when combined with apple cider vinegar, is useful as a wash for relieving the itch and drying the rash from poison ivy.

The leaves have similar properties to the bark, though milder. They have astringent and antiseptic qualities, which make them excellent as a spit-poultice for scratches, boils, bites, etc. Steeped in water in the sun for a day, they will produce a gentle astringent toner for the skin, not unlike witch hazel extract. This can be applied to bug bites, sunburn, and the like. It can also be used as a mouthwash for gums that bleed easily. For those who take a pipe, the leaves make a mild, tasty base for a smoking blend.

It must be mentioned that apple seeds, bark, and leaves contain hydrocyanic acid, which is toxic in any appreciable amount. The concentration of this is highest in the seeds. In the bark and leaves, it’s more interesting: it is fairly low while they are alive and growing, but increases steeply once they are damaged and begin to wilt; there’s a theory that this serves as both a defense mechanism and warning to nearby trees in the case of an insect invasion. Once they are dried, however, the hydrocyanic acid content drops off to its previous level, if not lower. So, while I have never heard of anyone actually getting sick from any sort of apple preparation, it only makes sense to take reasonable precautions: avoid the seeds (I know of no reason to use them anyway), use only fresh or thoroughly dried leaves and bark, and be light-handed with your dosage.

