***Lycium chinense* Mill.**

Solanaceae

Source of: gǒu qǐ yè, dì gǔ pí 枸杞叶, 地骨皮

Chinese matrimony vine leaf & rootbark

Summary Description

A woody shrub with a caning habit similar to raspberry, highly expansive and persistent, hardy to Zone 5 at least. *Lycium barbarum* L. is the species preferred for the fruit. However, the fruit is not recommended for New York production as plenty of consistent heat and sunlight are necessary for good flavor in the fruit, just like tomatoes, and the fruit ripens sequentially along the cane meaning that labor costs are high. However, *L. chinense* holds promise as a food-grade tea product; the leaf tea has been shown to be prebiotic. The canes are branched and sprawling to 3 feet in height, with ovate leaves up to 4 inches long. Pale purple flowers appear in late spring through summer, with red fruit like small oval cherry tomatoes August to November. The root, difficult to eradicate, is orange brown with a flaking bark. The dried rootbark is valuable as dì gǔ pí, "earth bone bark."

Propagation

Neither *L. chinense* nor *L. barbarum* comes true from seed and must be propagated from stem cuttings of known superior quality. Mark stem pieces to indicate upper and lower ends, strip lower portion to expose leaf nodes. Insert lower end into a rooting medium (half clean sand, half perlite is one option) or light potting soil. An established plant will sucker from the roots; cut chunks and transplant.

Cultivation

If cultivated for leaves, site plants in a high-canopy or part shade location with well-drained soil. The plant flowers on new wood and benefits from expert, thorough pruning 2-3x per year. Prune canes to an upright vase shape 4 feet in height, eliminate ground-huggers and crosswise stems. Mulch heavily between plants. In autumn after leaf harvest, cut canes back to 12 inches.

Harvest & Processing

Leaves: Harvest leaves in cool, moist weather for best flavor. Usually this is early spring, but in some years late spring or even autumn harvests are possible. Older canes have thorns, young shoots are thornless. If shrubs are properly maintained, many young shoots will appear in spring and may be easily hand-stripped of leaves. Dry whole leaves in a single layer with good airflow and temperatures not exceeding 110°F. *Rootbark:* Dig roots in late autumn, shake off the soil and lay in the sun to dry (if possible) for a few hours. Rinse roots in clean water. Peel bark from sections of root, in channeled sections ("quills") of 2-4 inches in length. Dry in temperatures not exceeding 110°F.

References

Flora of China: http://www.efloras.org/florataxon.aspx?flora_id=2&taxon_id=200020538

Bensky Materia Medica page: 222


Fruit in October: large-fruit cultivar with pruned canes above vs. small-fruit cultivar unpruned upper right
Note size of unpruned shrub
New shoots in spring
Photo: Tracey Testo