***Sophora flavescens* Ait.**

Fabaceae
Source of: kǔ shēn 苦参
sophora root

Summary Description

This full sun, herbaceous perennial, hardy to Zone 5, is classified in the Sophoreae Tribe of the legume family. At maturity, the plant is sturdy and bushy with multiple stems and a height of 4 to 5 feet. Compound leaves about one foot long have one to two dozen paired leaflets. Pale yellow flowers (specific to the variety *Sophora flavescens* var. *flavescens*) in long, terminal racemes bloom in July or August and are followed by dark-brown seed pods, slightly constricted between the beans, with a sharp beak at the end. Brown beans can be ¼ inch in diameter.

Propagation

Plants will self-sow in favorable conditions. Seedlings transplant easily. The beans stay viable for several years if kept in cool dry storage. Remove beans from pods, pour over them water heated to 140-160°F, let soak at room temperature for 24 hours. Sow seed in cell trays, cover with potting medium to a depth of 0.25 inch, use bottom heat. Germination should occur within 7-14 days.

Cultivation

After nursery germination, bright indirect light becomes more important than bottom heat. Use a deep flat (7 inches plus) to start, as roots grow quickly. Transplant to deeper quart pots to grow well-rooted seedlings. Plant in the ground at 36-inch spacing. Mulch with straw. Cut the tough stems back to the ground in autumn. Avoid too much moisture trapped over the crown in winter.

Harvest & Processing

Time to harvest estimated at 5 years. Root mass increases considerably as the plant ages, with large (1 inch diameter) roots being easier to process. One 12-year-old plant yielded 5.5 pounds fresh root, which dried down to 2 pounds of decoction pieces. Dig the entire plant after the stems have withered in autumn, or before shoots appear in the spring. The exterior surface of the root is dark brown and the interior color is yellow but dries to a cream color. Wash roots and cut crosswise or slightly oblique into 1/8th inch slices. Dehydrate or dry at temperatures less than 110°F.

References

Flora of China: http://www.efloras.org/florataxon.aspx?flora_id=2&taxon_id=200012319
Bensky *Materia Medica* page: 144

Alternates

FOC notes three varieties including *Sophora flavescens* var. *galegoides* with purple-red flowers and *S. flavescens* var. *kronei* with pale yellow flowers and densely hairy seed pods.

CHINESE MEDICINAL PLANT FACT SHEETS © 2018 Jean Giblette
NEW YORK GROWN CHINESE MEDICINAL HERBS PROJECT

Seedling and emergent shoots photos taken at Finger Lakes School of AOM, Seneca Falls NY