

ONE IMPORTANT CRITERION for combining herbs is their tastes or flavors. As noted in the Introduction to this book, the attribution of function to taste dates back to the *Inner Classic*, and the utilization of taste as a means of understanding how to best utilize herbal combinations can be found in texts from at least as early as the Tang dynasty. The table below provides a comprehensive outline of the clinical effects of taste combinations, along with examples. But first, here is an expanded example of how such taste combinations work in practice, based on the acrid taste.

1. Acrid and Sweet Disperses

A passage in Chapter 5 of *Basic Questions* notes that “Acrid and sweet discharges and disperses as yang.” It is common knowledge in China that a hot infusion of ginger and brown sugar can be used to treat an invasion of wind-cold, a typical example of this combination of flavors. An important classical formula incorporating this principle is Cinnamon Twig Decoction (*guì zhī tāng*), with Cinnamomi Ramulus (*guì zhī*) and Paeoniae Radix (*sháo yào*) paired with Glycyrrhizae Radix (*gān cǎo*) and Jujubae Fructus (*dà zǎo*). But it is also known that sweet tonifies while acrid disperses; when they are combined for the purpose of tonification, there is dispersal without obstruction. This is why tonifying formulas, while predominantly sweet, may also include acrid-flavored herbs. Examples include Chuanxiong Rhizoma (*chuān xiōng*) in Four-Substance Decoction (*sì wù tāng*), Citri reticulatae Pericarpium (*chén pí*) in Tonify the Middle to Augment the Qi Decoction (*bǔ zhōng yì qì tāng*), and Aucklandiae Radix (*mù xiāng*) in Restore the Spleen Decoction (*guī pí tāng*). Moreover, the acrid-sweet combi-

nation serves to regulate and harmonize, for example, the use of Pinelliae Rhizoma praeparatum (*zhì bàn xià*) combined with rice to harmonize the Stomach, or Zingiberis Rhizoma recens (*shēng jiāng*) and Jujubae Fructus (*dà zǎo*) to harmonize the nutritive and protective aspects.

2. Acrid Opens and Bitter Directs Downward

All the “Drain the Epigastrium” (*xiè xīn*) formulas in *Discussion of Cold Damage* utilize the acrid flavor of Zingiberis Rhizoma recens (*shēng jiāng*) and Pinelliae Rhizoma praeparatum (*zhì bàn xià*) combined with the bitter flavor of Scutellariae Radix (*huáng qín*) and Coptidis Rhizoma (*huáng lián*) to treat the nausea and rebelliousness of epigastric focal distention and fullness. Because acrid opens and bitter directs downward, this combination permits the clear qi to ascend and the turbid material to descend, as they should. Later formulas, such as Left Metal Pill (*zuǒ jīn wán*) or Aucklandia and Coptis Pill (*xiāng lián wán*), clearly exemplify this principle. It assumes even more importance in the methods that the warm disorder school adopted to address damp-warmth, as shown in such formulas as Coptis and Magnolia Bark Drink (*lián pò yǐn*) or Sweet Dew Special Pill to Eliminate Toxin (*gān lù xiāo dú dān*).

3. Acrid Disseminates and Sour Binds

When acrid and sour flavors are used together, within dispersion there is restraint and within restraint there is dispersion. One opens, the other closes, and although this appears to be contradictory, in practice it is very effective, allowing each to supplement the other. For example, in ancient formulas Schisandrae Fructus (*wǔ wèi zǐ*) and Asari Radix et Rhizoma (*xì xīn*) are frequently used together, as in cough

*Based on materials from Lin Qian-Liang, *Chinese Materia Medica*, 1981, pp. 27-31.

treatments to bind the Lungs and settle the cough while not obstructing the elimination of the pathogenic influence. This method can also prevent the excessive release of the exterior when it is used to expel cold, such as in the formulas Minor Bluegreen Dragon Decoction (*xiǎo qīng lóng tāng*) and Belamcanda and Ephedra Decoction (*shè gān má huáng tāng*).

4. Acrid Disperses and Salty Softens

Stubborn phlegm conditions can be treated with this combination of flavors, using acrid to disperse and salty to soften in order to transform phlegm and dissolve clumps. For example, Flushing Away Roiling Phlegm Pill (*gǔn tán wán*) uses the combination of Chloriti Lapis/Micae Lapis aureus (*méng shí*) and Aquilariae Lignum resinatum (*chén xiāng*), while Sargassum Decoction for the Jade Flask (*hǎi zǎo yù hú tāng*) very distinctively combines salty herbs such as Sargassum (*hǎi zǎo*) and Eckloniae Thallus (*kūn bù*) with

acrid ones that disperse, such as Pinelliae Rhizoma praeparatum (*zhì bàn xià*), Citri reticulatae Pericarpium (*chén pí*), Citri reticulatae viride Pericarpium (*qīng pí*), Angelicae pubescentis Radix (*dú huó*), and Chuanxiong Rhizoma (*chuān xiōng*).

5. Acrid Facilitates Movement while Bland Leaches

The acrid flavor promotes movement to transform dampness, while the bland flavor leaches out dampness and promotes fluid metabolism and urination. This combination of acrid and bland works best when targeting turbid dampness. A good example is Three-Seed Decoction (*sān rén tāng*) with its use of the bland Lophatheri Herba (*dàn zhú yè*) and Coicis Semen (*yì yǐ rén*) combined with acrid-flavored Amomi Fructus rotundus (*bái dòu kòu*) and Pinelliae Rhizoma praeparatum (*zhì bàn xià*), which treats both damp warmth and turbid dampness accumulating internally.

Summary Table of Combinations by Taste

■ Combinations and Examples

	Acrid	Bitter	Sweet	Sour	Salty	Bland
Acrid	Release the exterior; regulate qi	Open up and direct downward	Discharge and disperse to regulate the protective and nutritive	Simultaneously disperse and restrain	Transform phlegm and reduce clumps	Leach out dampness and transform turbidity
Bitter	Evodiae Fructus (<i>wú zhū yú</i>), Coptidis Rhizoma (<i>huáng lián</i>) [Left Metal Pill (<i>zuǒ jīn wán</i>)]	Purge and dry dampness	Clear Organ heat	Eject and drain outward	Soften hardness and purge	Leach out dampness and guide out heat [through the urine]
Sweet	Zingiberis Rhizoma recens (<i>shēng jiāng</i>), Glycyrrhizae Radix (<i>gān cǎo</i>) [Cinnamon Twig Decoction (<i>guì zhī tāng</i>)]	Gentianae Radix (<i>lóng dǎn cǎo</i>), Glycyrrhizae Radix (<i>gān cǎo</i>) [Gentian Decoction to Drain the Liver (<i>lóng dǎn xiè gān tāng</i>)]	Tonify and replenish	Preserve the yin and moderate spasmodic pain	Enrich the Liver and extinguish internal wind	Strengthen the Spleen and promote elimination of dampness
Sour	Asari Radix et Rhizoma (<i>xì xīn</i>), Schisandrae Fructus (<i>wú wèi zǐ</i>) [Minor Bluegreen Dragon Decoction (<i>xiǎo qīng lóng tāng</i>)]	Schisandrae Fructus (<i>wú wèi zǐ</i>), Armeniacae Semen (<i>xìng rén</i>)	Glycyrrhizae Radix (<i>gān cǎo</i>), Paeoniae Radix alba (<i>bái sháo</i>) [Peony and Licorice Decoction (<i>sháo yào gān cǎo tāng</i>)]	Restrain and inhibit and consolidate	Induce vomiting of wind-phlegm	Relieve Summerheat
Salty	Aquilariae Lignum resinatum (<i>chén xiāng</i>), Chloriti Lapis/Micae Lapis aureus (<i>méng shí</i>) [Flushing Away Roiling Phlegm Pill (<i>gǔn tán wán</i>)]	Rhei Radix et Rhizoma (<i>dà huáng</i>), Natrii Sulfas (<i>máng xiāo</i>) [Major Order the Qi Decoction (<i>dà chéng qì tāng</i>)]	Haliotidis Concha (<i>shí jué míng</i>), Ostreae Concha (<i>mù lì</i>), Gastrodiae Rhizoma (<i>tiān má</i>) [Gastrodia and Uncaria Drink (<i>tiān má gōu téng yǐn</i>)]	Ostreae Concha (<i>mù lì</i>) and Ziziphi spinosae Semen (<i>suān zǎo rén</i>); Mantidis Ootheca (<i>sāng piāo xiāo</i>) & Rubi Fructus (<i>fù péi zǐ</i>)	Purge by moistening & soften hardness	Direct down, drain out, and expel pathogenic water and dampness
Bland	Amomi Fructus rotundus (<i>bái dòu kòu</i>), Lophatheri Herba (<i>dàn zhú yè</i>) [Three-Seed Decoction (<i>sān rén tāng</i>)]	Akebiae Caulis (<i>mù tōng</i>), Lophatheri Herba (<i>dàn zhú yè</i>) [Guide out the Red Powder (<i>dǎo chì sǎn</i>)]	Glycyrrhizae Radix (<i>gān cǎo</i>), Poria (<i>fú líng</i>) [Poria and Licorice Decoction (<i>fú líng gān cǎo tāng</i>)]	Chaenomelis Fructus (<i>mù guā</i>), Poria (<i>fú líng</i>) [Six-Ingredient Drink with Mosla (<i>liù wèi xiāng rú yǐn</i>)]	Lysimachiae Herba (<i>jīn qián cǎo</i>), Talcum (<i>huá shí</i>) [for urinary calculus]	Leach out dampness and promote urination