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Give your taste buds a tingle with Szechuan Buttons

CHINO VALLEY, AZ—Szechuan Buttons are today's media stars. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have carried stories about Szechuan Buttons and National Public Radio produced a program about this amazing plant.

What's all the buzz about? Why, the buzz, of course. These yellow/red gumdrop-shaped edible flowers produce a strong, tingling and numbing effect on the tongue when eaten. It is like the old pop rocks candy, a very effervescent feeling.

The plant has no particular odor, but when eaten it has an interesting flavor that slowly develops from pleasant and salty to a strong, tingling that leaves a numb feeling in the mouth.

The leaves, and especially the flower heads, contain a natural analgesic that numbs the tongue and gums. This natural painkiller, spilanthol, is used to numb toothache pain, hence one of the plant's nicknames: the toothache plant. Other common names include Spilanthes, paracress and the eyeball plant. Latin names are *Acmella oleracea*, *Spilanthes oleracea* and *Spilanthes acmella*.

The analgesic spilanthol is similar to capsaicin, the chemical that gives chili peppers their heat. It triggers a reaction in the nerves in the mouth that control motor and sensory functions.

Although native to Brazil, Szechuan Buttons have a Chinese name because of its similarity to szechuan pepper, which also creates a tingling, popping sensation in the mouth.

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Cooking

The pungency of the toothache plant is wholly distinct to the heat of both black pepper and chiles, which makes it an interesting alternative for innovative cooks. It can be used together with other pungent spices, or alone.

These buttons add flavor to salads, sauces and soups. Small amounts of shredded fresh leaves can be used to add a unique flavor to salads. Cooked leaves lose their strong flavor and may be used as leafy greens.

In northern parts of Brazil, fresh and cooked leaves are used in dishes such as stews and are frequently combined with chilies and garlic to add flavor. A related species is used in several Southeast Asian dishes, such as salads. In Thai cuisine the leaves are one of the ingredients of the Kaeng khae curry. In India, the buds are used in preparing a spicy chicken soup and as flavoring in chewing tobacco. Szechuan Buttons can be crumbled on sorbet and used as cocktail garnishes.

Medicinal

The medicinal uses of spilanthes have been around for a long time. Spilanthol is an effective anti-parasitic, and has natural antibacterial and antifungal properties. Its efficacy against malaria is well documented. A mouth rinse of spilanthes extract can be used daily to promote gum health.

Spilanthes improves digestion, eases flatulence, improves the appetite, and helps to overcome nausea and vomiting by its stimulating effect on the salivary glands. Spilanthes extract aids in saliva stimulation (sialogogue) for people suffering from dry mouth (xerostomia).

Where can I get the amazing Szechuan Buttons?

The fresh buttons sell for somewhere around \$40 for a bag of 30 buttons, but if you grow them yourself it costs \$3.55 for a packet of 30 seeds, and you'll grow hundreds of buttons.

And freezing does not hurt their buzz, so you can have them year round.

Terroir Seeds LLC has certified organic Szechuan Buttons seeds in stock (item number H1053). See www.UnderwoodGardens.com for more information or to place an order.

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