Sarsaparilla (*Smilax spp.*)

**Parts used and where grown:** Many different species are called by the general name sarsaparilla. Various species are found in Mexico, South America, and the Caribbean. The root is used therapeutically.

**Historical or traditional use** (may or may not be supported by scientific studies): In Mexico, sarsaparilla was used for arthritis, cancer, skin diseases, and a host of other conditions.1 At the turn of the century, there were reports of its use in the treatment of psoriasis and leprosy.2 Sarsaparilla also has a tradition of use in various women’s health concerns and was rumored to have a progesterone-like effect. Sarsaparilla was formerly a major flavoring agent in root beer.

**Active constituents:** Sarsaparilla contains steroidal saponins, such as sarsasapogenin, which may mimic the action of some human hormones; this property remains undocumented. Sarsaparilla also contains phytosterols, such as beta-sitosterol, which may contribute to the anti-inflammatory effect of this herb. Reports have shown anti-inflammatory3 and liver-protecting4 effects for this herb.

**How much is usually taken?** Sarsaparilla is often taken in capsules at a dose of 2–4 grams three times daily.5 A tincture may also be used in the amount of 2–4 ml three times daily. Sarsaparilla is usually used in conjunction with other therapeutic herbs.
Are there any side effects or interactions? According to the German Commission E monograph, sarsaparilla may cause stomach irritation and temporary kidney irritation. As sarsaparilla can increase absorption and/or elimination of digitalis and bismuth, such combinations are contraindicated.

References: