

New Licks for Licorice



Scientists are probing the modern-age potentialities of this old Turkish plant

by **MADLYN WOOD**

MOST EVERYONE THINKS of licorice only as something you eat in the form of candy. Not so, for science has found that there is black magic in licorice, a versatile chemical which is already playing a considerable part in your life and seems destined to play a still larger one.

Witness a group of engineers at work at the Underwriters' Laboratories in Chicago. One of them tosses a burning rag into a tub of gasoline, which promptly roars up in flame. He aims a fire extinguisher at it, a smother of whitish foam sizzles across the fire—and the flames are snuffed out.

“That foam choked off the air,” the engineer explains. “Funny thing—it’s made out of licorice.”

That is just a start on a surprising catalog of uses for a long-known substance that science is just getting around to probing. Medicine, industry and agriculture are making the discovery that there are hidden powers in the substance extracted from the root of the strange Near Eastern plant that bears the title “Glycyrrhiza.”

Glycyrrhiza, or licorice, which we now import by the shipload from Turkey, has about as long a history as any plant useful to man. Forty centuries or more ago, in the areas of ancient Babylonian civilizations, slaves dug up the long, tough roots of this big weed. Their masters used the root extract as a tonic.

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Egyptian hieroglyphics indicate that in the days of the Pharaohs, licorice root was mixed with water to produce a drink known as "maius," still a favorite in Egypt today. In 1923, when King Tut-Ankh-Amen's tomb was opened, it was found to contain a considerable supply of licorice root.

Experts call licorice nature's sweetest substance. Thus, its biggest job in the compounding of medicines today is making them taste better, no minor task as any parent who has ever battled to get a child to take a dose of laxative or cough medicine can testify.

Meanwhile, in a dozen laboratories, medical researchers are beginning to wonder if the plant may not have even more important medical uses. Perhaps, they say, the medieval physicians had the right idea when they used licorice as a general tonic and blood purifier. A licorice compound is now showing evidence of power to combat Addison's disease, a form of anemia long puzzling to science. Another promising project hints that licorice can be effective in the treatment of stomach ulcers.

Though science is beginning to realize that these possibilities are important enough to warrant special research, it is a curious fact that licorice, which the ancients knew so well, has received up until now less medical study than many a synthetic compound that has just emerged from the laboratory.

Another of licorice's accomplishments has brought pleasant smoking to millions.

"Here's some fine grade tobacco," the white-coated technician in a tobacco company's research laboratory might tell you. "Just about the best there is. Take a puff."

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You light up, inhale and grimace. "Raw, isn't it?" he grins. "We'd be out of business if we sold it that way. Now smoke this—same tobacco."

Now you puff on a cigarette that is mild and pleasant, astonishingly different from the stuff that rasped your throat a moment before.

Licorice helps make the difference. It performs three important jobs that account for the sale by one company alone of no less than 20,000,000 pounds of it a year to the industry. Along with making the tobacco taste milder, it also sweetens and gives it its distinctive flavor. Just as important, it helps the tobacco retain its moisture.

How does the licorice get into the tobacco? Generally, the technicians say, the leaves are sprayed with or dipped into a liquid compound which, among other things, contains the licorice.

A FACT WHICH SADDENS the licorice importers is the odd one that, for all its increasing use in other fields, comparatively little of it is used in candy-making. While the British ate 813 pounds of licorice candy per 1,000 population, Americans ate something less than one-fourth that amount.

What makes the licorice people still unhappier is the fact that a lot of candy which is called "licorice" actually does not have any licorice in it at all. Instead, it is flavored with oil of anise.

To counteract this, the National Confectioners Association has been pushing new kinds of licorice confections made with an easy-to-mix licorice syrup, and some manufacturers have made the happy discovery that candy made with it is low in calories, just the thing for

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dieters. Incidentally, they have also found that candy made with licorice does not have to be black.

To add still more to its versatility, the by-products of licorice are turning out to be as useful as the extract. Soon you may have licorice walls in your home, for they have also turned it into a tough insulating board so resistant to heat and cold that a sheet of it half an inch thick is equal to a stone, brick or concrete wall six inches thick.

Engineers wondering what to do with the thick whitish foam that billowed up when the licorice roots were boiled, had no answer except to throw it away—that is, until William Williams Walker, now president of MacAndrews & Forbes, the company that imports most of our licorice, performed some mental gymnastics and tied up that foam with the basic fact about fire: if there is no oxygen present, there can be no flame.

The idea worked perfectly, and now fire trucks come armed with licorice foam to fight the most stubborn of fires. In oil refineries and chemical plants, where any fire would be a holocaust, licorice foam stands silent guard. Let the heat rise above a certain level in an oil storage tank, and sensitive thermostatic devices trigger the mechanism that sends that foam up to snuff out the flames.

Just where the exploits of this new handyman of science and industry are going to stop, nobody is quite certain, but scientists are sure there is still more black magic in licorice.

“The potential of this untested gift of nature has only been glimpsed,” says William Williams Walker. “Licorice may soon spring

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into amazing activity in the service of mankind.”

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