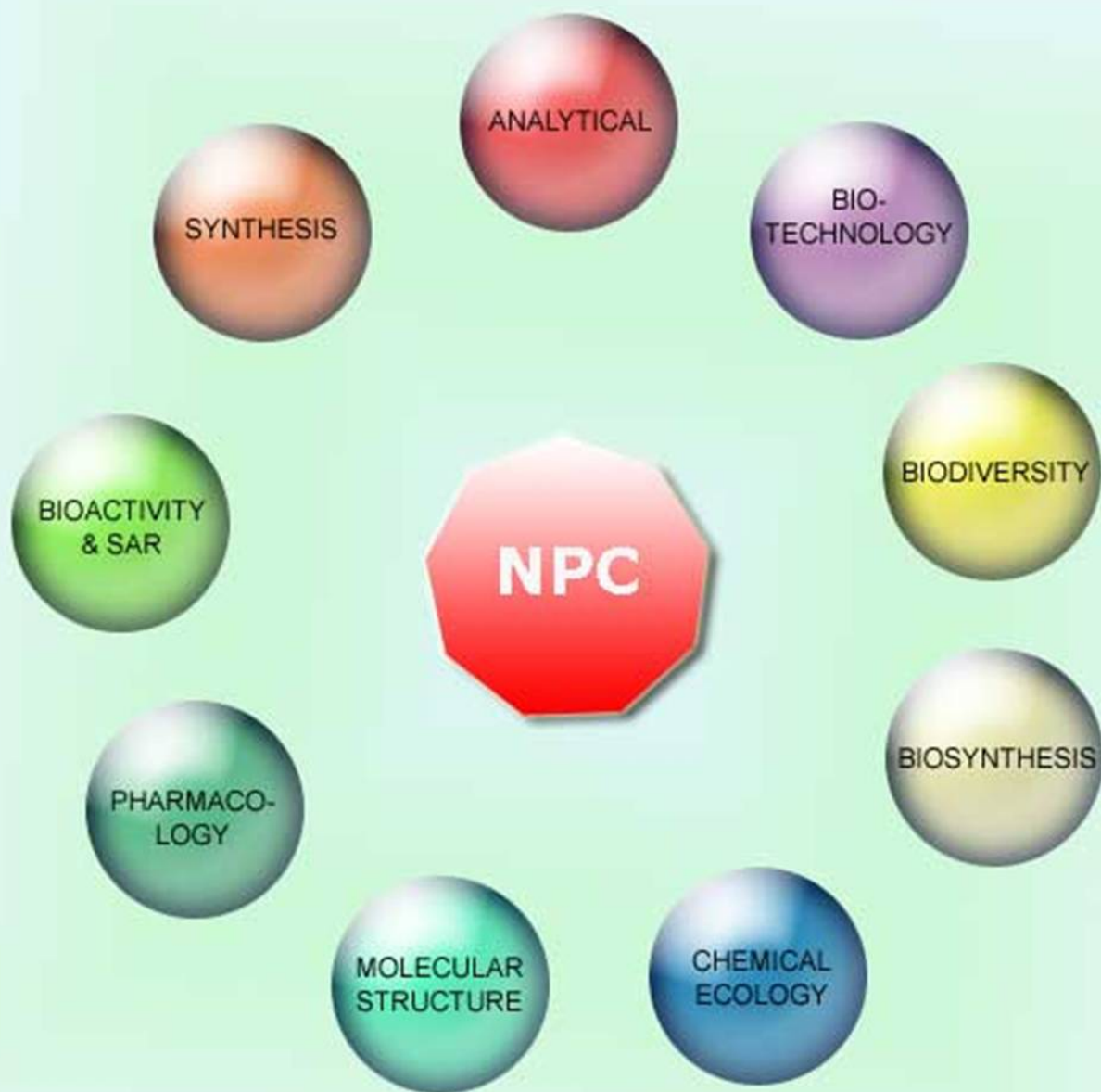


NATURAL PRODUCT COMMUNICATIONS

An International Journal for Communications and Reviews Covering all
Aspects of Natural Products Research



Volume 6. Issue 8. Pages 1055-1216. 2011
ISSN 1934-578X (printed); ISSN 1555-9475 (online)
www.naturalproduct.us

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The Therapeutic Potential of *Berberis darwinii* Stem-Bark: Quantification of Berberine and *In Vitro* Evidence for Alzheimer's Disease Therapy

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Received: February 22nd, 2011; Accepted: May 16th, 2011

Berberis darwinii is native to South America but has been widely distributed in Europe and other continents following its discovery by Charles Darwin. Herewith, the therapeutic potential of stem-bark of the plant for treating Alzheimer's disease was studied using an *in vitro* acetylcholinesterase inhibition assay. It was found that the methanolic extract of the stem-bark was a potent inhibitor of the enzyme with an IC₅₀ value of 1.23 ± 0.05 µg/mL. An HPLC-based berberine quantification study revealed an astonishing 38% yield of the dried methanolic extract.

Keywords: *Berberis darwinii*, Berberidaceae, berberine, acetylcholinesterase, Alzheimer's disease.

As a single chemical entity and a major constituent in plants extracts, berberine has been used as potent antimicrobial, anticancer, hepatoprotective, antidiabetic, cholesterol lowering effects, anti-inflammatory, immunomodulatory and many more activities [1a and references therein]. Recent studies further revealed that berberine has potent neuroprotective effects [1b]. Such neuroprotective effects combined with antioxidant activity are of particular significance to Alzheimer's disease (AD) where cholinergic neurons apoptosis is the major feature of the disease process. The other predominant feature of AD is the accumulation and aggregation of amyloid-β protein leading to the formation of intracellular neurofibrillary tangles and loss of normal neuronal functions [1c]. Interestingly, berberine has been shown to suppress the release of amyloid-β from the membrane-associated glycoprotein precursor amyloid protein [1d]. A further key therapeutic approach for AD is the inhibition of acetylcholinesterase (ACHE) enzyme thereby increasing the lifespan of the neurotransmitter, acetylcholine [1e]. Since berberine has also been demonstrated to potently inhibit ACHE [1f], berberine containing plants are likely to have therapeutic potential for AD.

Berberis darwinii Hook (Berberidaceae) is native to South America; southern Chile and Argentina. The plant is known to be discovered in 1835 by Charles Darwin during the voyage of the 'Beagle' and was named in his honor [2a]. Known by its common names such as Darwin's Barberry and (Argentinean-Chilean Spanish) Michay, the fruits are edible though they are acidic and rather favored

by birds [2a, personal observation]. *B. darwinii* is now one of the popular garden and hedge plant in Britain. Except for the earlier report by Cromwell in 1933 [2b] that documented the biosynthesis of berberine, no pharmacological or phytochemical studies have ever been reported on the plant. Owing to the above mentioned therapeutic potential of berberine and/or berberine-containing plants, the present study focused on establishing the therapeutic potential of *B. darwinii* for AD.

It was previously noted that the berberine content of *B. darwinii* was the highest in the root-bark of the plant with estimated average dry weight content of 11%, while the stem-bark was reported to contain 2.67-4.93% [2b]. In contrast to the bark of *B. darwinii*, the most common source of berberine plant, Goldenseal (*Hydrastis canadensis* L., Ranunculaceae), was shown to contain up to a maximum content of 4.62% in the dried Rhizome, while the other principal constituent, hydrastine, was 2.77% [2c]. The other well known berberine containing commercial plant is the dried root of *Coptis chinensis*, which is reported to contain up to a maximum level of 7.27% berberine together with small amount (less than 2%) of other principal constituents, palmatine and jatrorrhizine [2d]. Based on these literature information, there is no doubt that the bark of *B. darwinii* is just as good source (if not better) of berberine as Goldseal and *Coptis*.

An HPLC method with reverse phase C-18 column and ammonium acetate-acetonitrile gradient elution system was used for berberine analysis. The separations of the

Table 1: Anti-ACHE activity of Berberine, *B. darwinii* stem-bark extract and eserine.*

Drugs	IC ₅₀ , µg/mL	IC ₅₀ , µM
Berberine	0.44±0.02	1.18 ± 0.06
<i>B. darwinii</i>	1.23±0.05	-
Eserine	0.28 ±0.05	1.01 ± 0.16

*IC₅₀ values obtained from 4 independent experiments are shown.

stem-bark constituents were achieved during the first 10 minutes of the 25 min analysis time. The study revealed that berberine was the major constituent of the crude methanolic extract of *B. darwinii*. In order to quantify the content of berberine in the extract, a calibration curve for berberine as an external standard was plotted. Straight line equations with regression line, correlation coefficient (r^2) of 0.9998 to 0.9999, were obtained. Based on this analysis, the berberine content in the methanolic extract of the fresh stem-bark was calculated as $38.09 \pm 0.966\%$ (n=10). This means that the content of berberine in fresh stem-bark of *B. darwinii* was $4.57 \pm 0.12\%$ (n=10). Considering that a fresh plant material was used for the analysis, the observed high yield of berberine was rather astonishing.

With the level of berberine in the extract established, the therapeutic potential of the stem-bark of *B. darwinii* for AD was further assessed by analyzing its anti-ACHE effect using the Ellman *et al.* [2e] method. In agreement with previous reports [1f] the present study demonstrated that berberine is a potent ACHE inhibitor (Table 1). The activity of berberine was comparable with the standard anti-ACHE drug, eserine (Table 1): the mean values were not significantly different from each other ($p > 0.05$; unpaired *t*-test). As evidenced by the IC₅₀ values (Table 1), the crude extract was about 3-fold less potent than berberine: which appear to be in good agreement with the observed percentage yield (38%) of berberine in the crude extract.

In conclusion, the stem-bark of *B. darwinii* may be used as an alternative source of berberine and has a potential to be

used for AD. Given that berberine has a wide range of other biological activities, further studies on the therapeutic potential of *B. darwinii* is well merited.

Experimental

Plant material and extraction: *B. darwinii* grown in our medicinal garden and believed to be over 20 years old has been used. The plant was authenticated and voucher specimens deposited at our laboratory collections. The fresh stem-bark (142 g) from the main stem of the plant was chopped into pieces and placed in a large extraction flask. The plant material was then soaked in methanol (2.5 L) and left in the dark for two weeks. The resulting extract was concentrated under reduced vacuum using rotary evaporator to yield 17 g of the crude extract.

Quantification of berberine by HPLC: Samples (20 µL) were injected onto a reverse phase column (Agilent – Eclipse XDB-C18, 5 µm, 4.6 x 150 mm). The mobile phase was a mixture of 10 mM ammonium acetate containing 0.08% formic acid (A) and acetonitrile (B). The composition of the mobile phase at a flow rate of 1 mL/min was rising from 30% to 70% B over a period of 20 minutes. The composition of B was further increased to 90% B over 5 minutes. The berberine concentration in the crude extracts was quantified from the standard curves constructed from two-fold standard berberine dilutions made from a stock solution of 1 mg/mL. All experiments were repeated at least ten times and the amount of berberine, based on the peak area at $\lambda = 280$ nm, was calculated using GraphPad InStat software (GraphPad, San Diego, USA).

Anti-ACHE assay: The Ellman *et al.* [2e] colorimetric method of anti-ACHE assay was adopted for microtitre-based assay.

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Bioactive Metabolites from Biotransformation of Paeonol by the White-Rot Basidiomycete <i>Coriolus versicolor</i> Xiao-Jun Li, Xin-Wei Shi, Qi Shuai, Jin-Ming Gao and An-Ling Zhang	1129
Two Compounds from the Endophytic <i>Colletotrichum</i> sp. of <i>Ginkgo biloba</i> Sheng-Liang Zhou, Song-Lin Zhou, Mei-Xia Wang and Shuang-Lin Chen	1131
Two New Alkylanacardic Acids, Ozorcardic A and B, from <i>Ozoroa pulcherrima</i> Tsague Dongmo Christelle, Hidayat Hussain, Etienne Dongo, Jatsa-Megaptche Boukeng Hermine, Ishtiaq Ahmed and Karsten Krohn	1133
Cordioxime: A New Dioxime γ-Lactam from <i>Cordia platythyrsa</i> Tsague Dongmo Christelle, Hidayat Hussain, Etienne Dongo, Oben Enyong Julius and Javid Hussain	1135
Biosynthesis, Characterization and Biological Evaluation of Fe(III) and Cu(II) Complexes of Neoaspergillilic Acid, a Hydroxamate Siderophore Produced by Co-cultures of two Marine-derived Mangrove Epiphytic Fungi Feng Zhu, Jingshu Wu, Guangying Chen, Weihong Lu and Jiahui Pan	1137
Epoxidation of Soybean Oil Catalyzed by $[\pi\text{-C}_5\text{H}_5\text{NC}_{16}\text{H}_{33}]_3[\text{PW}_4\text{O}_{16}]$ with Hydrogen Peroxide and Ethyl Acetate as Solvent Shuang-Fei Cai and Li-Sheng Wang	1141
GC/MS Analysis of the Essential Oil of <i>Senecio belgaumensis</i> Flowers Rajesh K. Joshi	1145
Composition of the Essential Oils from <i>Anthriscus cerefolium</i> var. <i>trichocarpa</i> and <i>A. caucalis</i> Growing Wild in the Urban Area of Vienna (Austria) Remigius Chizzola	1147
Chemical Composition of the Essential Oil of <i>Pituranthos scoparius</i> Nadhir Gourine, Bahia Merrad, Mohamed Yousfi, Pierre Stocker and Emile M. Gaydou	1151
Characterization of Volatile Components of Tea Flowers (<i>Camellia sinensis</i>) Growing in Kangra by GC/MS Robin Joshi, Poonam, Rikki Saini, Shailja Guleria, Garikapati D. Kiran Babu, Manisha Kumari and Ashu Gulati	1155
Susceptibility of the Multi-drug Resistant Strain of <i>Enterobacter aerogenes</i> EA289 to the Terpene Alcohols from <i>Cistus ladaniferus</i> Essential Oil Elodie Guinoiseau, Vannina Lorenzi, Anne Luciani, Félix Tomi, Joseph Casanova and Liliane Berti	1159
Composition and Antimicrobial Activity of <i>Seseli globiferum</i> Essential Oil Peda Janačković, Marina Soković, Ljubodrag Vujisić, Vlatka Vajs, Ivan Vučković, Zoran Krivošej and Petar D. Marin	1163
Chemical Composition and Antimicrobial activity of <i>Satureja kitaibelii</i> Essential Oil against Pathogenic Microbial Strains Tatjana Mihajilov-Krstev, Dušanka Kitić, Dragan Radnović, Mihajlo Ristić, Mira Mihajlović-Ukropina and Bojan Zlatković	1167
Influence of Growth Phase on the Essential Oil Composition and Antimicrobial Activities of <i>Satureja hortensis</i> Mohammad Jamal Saharkhiz, Kamiar Zomorodian, Mohammad Reza Rezaei, Farshid Saadat and Mohammad Javad Rahimi	1173
Chemical Composition and Antioxidant Activities of the Essential Oil from <i>Tornabenea bischoffii</i> (Apiaceae) Risoleta Ortet, Erik L. Regalado, Olivier P. Thomas, Jorge A. Pino and Miguel D. Fernández	1179
Chemical Composition and Insecticidal Activity of Essential oils of two Aromatic plants from Ivory Coast against <i>Bemisia tabaci</i> G. (Hemiptera: Aleyrodidae) Etienne V. Tia, Augustin A. Adima, Sébastien L. Niamké, Gnago A. Jean, Thibaud Martin, Paul Lozano and Chantal Menut	1183
Influence of Viral Infection on Essential Oil Composition of <i>Ocimum basilicum</i> (Lamiaceae) Alice Nagai, Lúgia M.L. Duarte and Déborah Y.A.C. Santos	1189
<i>Neolitsea aciculata</i> Essential Oil Inhibits Drug-Resistant Skin Pathogen Growth and <i>Propionibacterium acnes</i>-Induced Inflammatory Effects of Human Monocyte Leukemia Sang Suk Kim, Jung Eun Kim, Chang-Gu Hyun and Nam Ho Lee	1193
Aroma-therapeutic Effects of Massage Blended Essential Oils on Humans Tapanee Hongratanaworakit	1199
<u>Review/Account</u>	
Biological Activity of Bicyclic and Tricyclic Diterpenoids from <i>Salvia</i> Species of Immediate Pharmacological and Pharmaceutical Interest Maria Carmela Bonito, Carla Cicala, Maria Carla Marcotullio, Francesco Maione and Nicola Mascolo	1205

Natural Product Communications

2011

Volume 6, Number 8

Contents

<u>Original Paper</u>	<u>Page</u>
Two New Sesquiterpene Lactones from <i>Ixeris sonchifolia</i> Shao-jiang Song, Ling-yan Zhou, Ling-zhi Li, Pin-yi Gao, Wei-wei Jia and Ying Peng	1055
Additional Minor Diterpene Glycosides from <i>Stevia rebaudiana</i> Venkata Sai Prakash Chaturvedula and Indra Prakash	1059
New Virescenosides from the Marine-derived Fungus <i>Acremonium striatisporum</i> Shamil Sh. Afiyatullo, Anatoly I. Kalinovsky and Alexandr S. Antonov	1063
New Clerodane Diterpenoid from the Bulbils of <i>Dioscorea bulbifera</i> Kanlaya Kidyu, Haruthai Thaisuchat, Puttinan Meepowpan, Sukee Sukdee, Narong Nuntasae, Sittiporn Punyanitya and Wilart Pompimon	1069
Gastroprotective Activity of Epitaondiol and Sargaol Carlos Areche, Aurelio San-Martín, Juana Rovirosa and Beatriz Sepúlveda	1073
Structure of Cucumariosides H₅, H₆, H₇ and H₈, Triterpene Glycosides from the Sea Cucumber <i>Eupentacta fraudatrix</i> and Unprecedented Aglycone with 16,22-Epoxy-group Alexandra S. Silchenko, Anatoly I. Kalinovsky, Sergey A. Avilov, Pelageya V. Andryjaschenko, Pavel S. Dmitrenok, Ekaterina A. Yurchenko and Vladimir I. Kalinin	1075
Pregnane Derivatives from <i>Potentilla evestita</i> Rehan Khan, Farah Siddiq, Itrat Fatima, Shazia Yasmeen, Aman Karim, Abdul Malik, Nighat Afza and Saira Hameed	1083
Insect Growth Regulatory Activity of <i>Blechnum chilense</i> Carlos A. Hincapié L., Zulma Monsalve F., Katherine Parada, Claudio Lamilla, Julio Alarcón, Carlos L. Céspedes A. and David Seigler	1085
The Therapeutic Potential of <i>Berberis darwinii</i> Stem-Bark: Quantification of Berberine and <i>In Vitro</i> Evidence for Alzheimer's Disease Therapy Solomon Habtemariam	1089
A Set of Two Diastereomers of Cyanogenic Glycosides from <i>Passiflora quadrangularis</i> Daisuke Saeki, Takeshi Yamada, Tetsuya Kajimoto, Osamu Muraoka and Reiko Tanaka	1091
Inhibition on HIV-1 Integrase Activity and Nitric Oxide Production of Compounds from <i>Ficus glomerata</i> Kingkan Bunluepuech, Teeratad Sudsai, Chatchai Wattanapiromsakul and Supinya Tewtrakul	1095
Two New Prenylflavanones from <i>Erythrina sigmoidea</i> Muhammad Shaiq Ali, Muhammad Imran Ali, Zeeshan Ahmed and Patricia A. Onocha	1099
Prenylated Flavonoids from the Leaves of <i>Derris malaccensis</i> and their Cytotoxicity Daranee Chokchaichamnankit, Vorawan Kongjinda, Nisachon Khunnawutmanotham, Nitirat Chimnoi, Somchai Pisutcharoenpong and Supanna Techasakul	1103
Content of Phenolic Compounds in Aerial Parts of <i>Chamomilla suaveolens</i> from Estonia Ain Raal, Tõnu Püssa, Janne Sepp, Birgit Malmiste and Elmar Arak	1107
Biflavonoids from the Roots of <i>Wikstroemia indica</i> Xiaoli Zhang, Guocai Wang, Weihuan Huang, Wencai Ye and Yaolan Li	1111
Drypetdimer A: A New Flavone Dimer from <i>Drypetes gerrardii</i> Margaret Mwhiki Ng'ang'a, Hidayat Hussain, Sumesh Chhabra, Caroline Langat-Thoruwa, Muhammad Riaz and Karsten Krohn	1115
Chemical Constituents of <i>Cichorium intybus</i> and their Inhibitory Effects against Urease and α-Chymotrypsin Enzymes Sumayya Saied, Shazia Shah, Zulfiqar Ali, Ajmal Khan, Bishnu P. Marasini and Muhammad Iqbal Choudhary	1117
Antimicrobial Activity and Cytotoxic Effects of <i>Magnolia dealbata</i> and its Active Compounds Maria del Rosario Jacobo-Salcedo, Luis Angel Gonzalez-Espindola, Angel Josabad Alonso-Castro, Marisela del Rocio Gonzalez-Martinez, Fabiola Domínguez and Alejandro Garcia-Carranca	1121
DPPH Radical Scavenging and Xanthine Oxidase Inhibitory Activity of <i>Terminalia macroptera</i> Leaves Anh Thu Pham, Karl Egil Malterud, Berit Smestad Paulsen, Drissa Diallo and Helle Wangensteen	1125

Continued inside backcover