

# HEALING CIVILIZATIONS

## *An Interview + Excerpt*

with NADIM A. SHAATH, PHD

*Excerpted from Healing Civilizations © by Nadim A. Shaath, PhD., photography by Thomas Hartwell. Used with permission from Cameron + Company.*

### HIBISCUS SABDARIFFA

Herbal hibiscus, also known as African hibiscus or roselle, has long been a popular herbal medicine throughout Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. The principal part of the plant that possesses health benefits is the plant's calyx, the fleshy, leaflike structure surrounding the plant's flower buds and encircling the base of the flower in blossoming plants. The calyx of hibiscus is bright red, somewhat succulent, and cone shaped when immature, but it eventually develops into a starburst shape. Its high concentration of vitamin C is indicated by its pleasant sour taste, although hibiscus also contains a high number of other natural antioxidant compounds.

*Hibiscus sabdariffa* was originally cultivated in western regions of Africa from Angola in the south, up through equatorial West Africa, the Congo region, and Nigeria, into the Sahel. Although hibiscus is still locally produced in these regions, modern large-scale cultivation of hibiscus is dominated by China and Thailand. Egypt, Mexico, and various sub-Saharan African countries also produce hibiscus in significant quantities, although almost exclusively for domestic use.

Hibiscus tisanes are popular throughout much of the tropical and subtropical world. Sudan tea is a popular preparation of hibiscus in eastern Africa that is commonly drunk as a cough remedy. A cold and sweet preparation of hibiscus-infused water called karkade is consumed across the Middle and Near East. *Flor de Jamaica*, a sweet, watery hibiscus drink, is virtually ubiquitous throughout the Latin American world as an agua fresca. Similar beverages exist throughout

the Caribbean. Hibiscus was first introduced into the Americas by captive Africans kidnapped as part of the slave trade and dispersed throughout Latin culture as all segments of society developed a taste for the flavor and an appreciation of the health benefits of this herb.

The primary health benefits of hibiscus are a consequence of the high content of vitamins and antioxidant compounds present in the roselle calyx. High levels of available vitamin C make hibiscus teas popular choices for warding off or mitigating looming ailments such as coughs and fevers, as well as contributing to the flowers' pleasantly tart taste. Consumed regularly, hibiscus has been demonstrated to alleviate hypertension. The high concentrations of antioxidant compounds promote increased production of nitric oxide compounds, which reduce the presence of oxidized lipids in the body and moderate high blood pressure. Moreover, these antioxidant compounds, like all others of their class, are beneficial in regular diets for neutralizing free radicals throughout the body, thus reducing risks of cancerous cells developing.

*Hibiscus sabdariffa* is not the only member of the genus *Hibiscus* that humans use to improve quality of life. There are many species and varieties of hibiscus worldwide that are beautiful and integral parts of our horticultural landscapes. Most famous among the genus is *Hibiscus rosa sinensis*, or tropical hibiscus, which bears large, colorful flowers and adorns and beautifies innumerable villages and city avenues across the tropical world. Tropical hibiscus is believed to have originated through concerted breeding efforts in Southeast Asia, from where it was transplanted throughout the Pacific. Hibiscus is an important feature in the traditional Polynesian lei, the colorful floral garland featured in a wide variety of ceremonies.