Sarsaparilla has been used traditionally to treat syphilis and glandular imbalance. The name sarsaparilla or zarzaparilla comes from the Spanish word zarza (bramble or bush), parra (vine), and illa (small)—a small, brambled vine. Sarsaparilla root has been used for centuries by the indigenous peoples of Central and South America for sexual impotence, rheumatism, skin ailments, and as a general tonic for physical weakness. It has long been used by tribes in Peru and Honduras for headaches and joint pain, and against the common cold. Many shamans and medicine men in the Amazon use sarsaparilla root internally and externally for leprosy and other skin problems.

Description - A perennial vine Sarsaparilla is a brambled, woody vine that grows up to 50 m long, with paired tendrils for climbing (often high into the rainforest canopy). It produces small flowers and black, blue, or red...
berrylike fruits which are eaten greedily by birds. *Smilax*, a member of the lily family, is native to tropical and temperate parts of the world and comprises about 350 species worldwide.

**Cultivation**— The stems of many *Smilax* species are covered with prickles and, sometimes, these vines are cultivated to form impenetrable thickets (which are called *catbriers* or *greenbriers*). The root, used for medicinal purposes, is long and tuberous—spreading 6–8 feet—and is odorless and fairly tasteless. Many species of *Smilax* around the world share the name *sarsaparilla*; these are very similar in appearance, uses, and even chemical structure.

**Active Compounds** - Saponins based on the aglycones *sarsapogenin*(parigenin), *sarsaparilloside* and *smilagenin*. diosgenin, tigogenin, asperagenin, laxogenin Fibeta II sitosterol, stigmasterol and their glucosides, calcium copper, iron, iodine, silicon, manganese, potassium, sodium, sulphur, Vitamins A, C, D and B complex, Other constituents Caffeoylshikimic acid, ferulic acid, shikimic acid, kaempferol, quercetin, phytosterols (e.g. 3-sitosterol, stigmasterol, pollinastanol, Resin, starch, volatile oil (trace) and cetyl alcohol.

**Properties/Actions Documented by Research:**
Anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, antifungal, antimutagenic (cellular protector), blood cleanser, detoxifier, diuretic, hepatoprotective (liver protector), immunomodulator (selectively reduces overactive immune cells), neuroprotective (protects brain cells)

- Used for skin diseases, psoriasis, rheumatic complaints, kidney diseases and as a Diuretic and diaphoretic. In homeopathy it is used for skin rashes, rheumatism and inflammation of the urinary organs
- Used to increase flesh and muscular power through improving digestion and Assimilation.
- Used for syphilis, chronic rheumatism, scrofulous disease, tuberculosis, skin diseases, alterative, to stimulate appetite and digestion and to increase strength

**Side-effects, Toxicity**
- None documented for sarsaparilla. Large doses of saponins are reported to cause gastrointestinal irritation resulting in diarrhoea and vomiting.
- Although haemolytic activity has been documented for the saponins, (G62) they are not harmful when taken by mouth and are only highly toxic if injected into the bloodstream .(G59)

**Contra-indications, Warnings**
- None documented for sarsaparilla. In view of the possible irritant nature of the saponin constituents.
- Excessive ingestion should be avoided.
- Pregnancy and lactation there are no known problems with the use of sarsaparilla during pregnancy and lactation.
- However, in view of the possible irritant nature of the saponin components, excessive ingestion should be avoided

**Pharmaceutical Comment**
Phytochemical studies on sarsaparilla have focused on the nature of the steroidal saponin constituents, with limited information available regarding additional constituents. No documented scientific evidence was found to justify the herbal uses. No toxicity data were located, although large doses maybe irritant to the gastrointestinal mucosa an should, therefore, be avoided.
Sarsaparilla saponins have been used in the partial synthesis of cortisone and other steroids. Several related Smilax species native to China are used to treat various skin disorders.

References: