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1.1 Old and New Concepts of Tannins

The pharmacological activities of tannins described in medicinal books before the recent achievements on ellagitannin chemistry were mostly those of gallotannins and condensed tannins of poor chemical uniformity. The gallotannins extracted from Chinese or Turkish gall, substances called tannic acid, are variable mixtures of polygalates of carbohydrates. They cause irritation on skin and mucous membranes, although they have been utilized in some traditional medicinal applications, and are technically defined on the basis of their general capacity to bind to proteins and nitrogen bearing compounds such as alkaloids. The condensed tannins, mixtures of oligomeric and polymeric flavanols (e.g., catechins), are chemically more unstable and heterogeneous, thus conforming to the