

Farm brief: Medicinal leech farming, China

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Recently the author had the opportunity to visit a leech hatchery and farm in Anhui Province, China, producing the medicinal leech *Whitmania pigra*.

The farm is producing 36 tonnes wet weight of leeches per year, which is dried to produce around 6 tonnes of final product. The dried product sells for around RMB 700 per kilo or just under US\$100, which is used both in traditional Chinese medicine and in a variety of registered medicinal products such as blood thinning capsules.

The leeches are free swimming and grow up to 50 g in weight and can stretch to well over 15 cm in length, their 'actual' length being somewhat hard to gauge. They are reared in long above ground tanks of 135 m² in area, each of which can hold up to about 10,000 individual leeches. The tanks are covered with shade cloth to maintain a dim environment.

The farm produces its own seed; adult leeches can produce around three cocoons each containing around 30 eggs, or a total of 90 eggs per individual, which are reared and then stocked into the tanks.

Noting the apparent lack of interns in the vicinity, the author ventured a question on how one might feed 10,000 leeches? Happily (at least for us) this particular leech is predatory and



Non-hematophagous medicinal leech, Whitmania pigra.

not blood feeding. It naturally feeds on a variety of aquatic snail species, even as a freshly hatched juvenile. The farm feeds the leeches with live aquatic snails sourced from ponds in the vicinity, which are an incidental byproduct and not cultured in themselves.





A bit of a handful.



Leeches are fed on aquatic snails sourced from ponds.



Discarded (hatched) leech egg masses.



Waste shells from feeding.

Traditional, registered medicinal products containing dried leech, including blood thinners for treating heart disease.

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