Valeriana officinalis
[va-ler-ee-AH-nuh oh-fiss-ih-NAH-liss]

Family: Valerianaceae,

Names: all-heal, Capon’s tail, Setwell, Cutheal, Treacle; Garden Heliotrope; Vandalroot; Phu, Amatilla, Set Well, Capon’s Tailor, St. George’s Herb, Setuale, Cat’s Valerian, English Valerian; Tagara; Walerian, Kozlek Lekarski (Polish); Baldrian (German)

Pharmaceutical Name: rhizoma Valerianae

Description: Native to Great Britain, Europe and Asia. Naturalized in Canada and northern US, in low meadows and wet wood. The flowers are decorative, reaching 4 to 5 feet tall in moist soil. Leaves make a basal clump of divided leaflets in 7 to 10 pairs either side of the stem. The flowering stems shoot up in May and last for many weeks. The habit of spreading roots is one drawback to the plant in small garden beds and its attraction to cats is another. But as with Catnip, the felines may not know it’s there unless the roots are disturbed. They have none of the sweet scent of the flowers. In fact, the plant has been called “Valerian Phu”, in one species. Smell has often been compared to dirty socks.

Cultivation: Perennial Zone 4. Soil: Moist. pH: 6 to 7. Valerian has small seeds which are wafted about in the breeze by their pappus or fluffy hairs which act as tiny parachutes. Seeds may be sown in a flat, with the medium kept at 60°F-70°F. Germination will take up to 3 weeks. Plants self-sow in the garden, as well as spreading by roots. Valerian is usually obtained as a division. It will root quickly, sending up a rosette of leaves in about two weeks. It is tolerant of shade, making a bright spot of light flowers and fragrance in the back of the garden. Seldom needs staking but it is subject to aphids as the flowers go to seed. They had best be cut off anyway, so spraying can be avoided and so that the rootstock develops better. The botanical name Valerian comes from the Latin meaning “to be strong”. This may refer to its endurance in the garden under adverse conditions, or the smell of the roots. Difficult to remove once established. The root can be harvested by the autumn of the second year after the vegetative growth begins to yellow and die back to the ground. Harvesting can be facilitated by mowing the tops back to the ground beforehand. The roots can be lifted with a space or small garden fork, or for larger plantings by shallow plowing.
They should be shaken vigorously to remove as much dirt as possible from the intertwining rootlets. Roots ¾ inch and thicker should be split before drying. Care must be taken to wash off all the dirt. Wash under running water with enough pressure to dislodge adhering particles. Valerian should be dried under shade or low forced heat (below 100F). Some gardeners take the flowers off young plants to hasten root development. Commercial plantings have produced yields of a ton per acre.

Valerian looks best when its flowers begin to gracefully sway on their tall stalks. It goes well towards the back of the garden, where it will happily grow in tight clumps.

Language of Flowers: An accommodating disposition

Energetics: Pungent, slightly bitter, cool, dry

Meridians/Organs affected: liver, heart

Constituents: Iridoids called valepotriates (to 2%); glycoside (valerosidatum); essential oil (to 2%) includes esters of acetic, butyric, and isovalerianic acids, which yield isovalerianic acid when dried, giving valerian its distinct aroma; sesquiterpene; alkaloids. In 1907, researcher Chevalier stated that fresh valerian is more active than the dried root.

Properties: tranquilizer, antispasmodic, expectorant, diuretic, lowers blood pressure, carminative, mild anodyne

History: The ‘officinalis’ in its botanical name means that it was used medicinally and sold in the shops of the druggists and apothecaries. The Roman name vakere was derived from valor for courage. The root excites some animals, especially rats and cats. It is rumored that the famous Pied Piper of Hamelin owed his success in leading the rats out of the city to having had his pockets stuffed full of valerian rather than to his music! Valerian is still used by rat catchers. North American Indians snorted valerian powder to calm epileptic seizures. One story has that to attract a woman, a man must make a magic ouch that holds cayenne pepper, patchouli and valerian root. He must pick the valerian in the nude and stand on one foot as he says the name of the sought-after woman.

Valerian has a place in Nordic mythology where the goddess Hertha, used it as a riding whip when racing through the forest on her hops-bridled stag. The herb symbolized the appeasing powers that could tame a wild beast.

Culinary: As strong as it may be, valerian was used as a spice in the Middle Ages and the leaves were used as Anglo-Saxon salad herbs. Gerard mentioned the esteem in which the 16th century Scots held valerian, noting that “no broth or pottage be worth anything if setewale be not there”. The flowers of valerian have a warm, aromatic taste and go well with fruit dishes especially those with a pungent flavor, passion fruit, nectarines and bananas.

Ritual: Gender: Cold; Planet: Mercury; Element: water; Basic Powers: Love, Harmony; Specific Uses: Use the fresh herb in spells of love, also to get fighting couples together. Used in a purification bath sachet. Add to the chalice as an herb of peace. It is used to asperge the ritual space and in incense for purification. It has been used as a substitute for graveyard dust to repel unwanted presences. Flower for those born on March 16.

Candle Hex: Blend asafetida, cayenne pepper, and valerian and sprinkle over your enemy’s photograph. If you lack a photo, write the enemy’s full name, variations on his or her name, and his or her mother’s name on a piece of paper. Place a black candle atop the photograph or name-paper and burn.

Medicinal Uses: Valerian root is a general tranquilizer used for relieving nervous tension, insomnia, and headaches. Widely studied, it has been shown to sedate the central nervous system due to the valepotriates and other
components found in the essential oil. Valerian decreases muscle spasms, so is useful for cases of nervous digestion, irritable bowel syndrome, and stomach or menstrual cramps. It contains many types of valepotriates that have opposing effects, indicating that it has the ability to regulate many conditions. In one study, it sedated agitated patients, but stimulated those suffering from fatigue. Valerian improved the quality of sleep in subjects in another study, as observed in their brain-wave patterns. It also reduced the time it took them to fall asleep, especially the elderly and the habitually poor sleepers, but did not affect their dream recall or ability to wake up in the morning. In Germany, hyperactive children have been treated with valerian since the 1970s. After taking valerian for only a few weeks, 120 children diagnosed as hyperactive, anxious, or learning disabled had better muscle coordination and reaction time, and showed less aggression, restlessness, anxiety, and fear. Valerian may also lower blood pressure and strengthen the optic nerve in the eye, although thus far, only animal studies have been done.

Functions and Uses: 1) Stimulates the heart, circulation and lungs; restores the nerve-brain and spine; lifts the spirit and rids depression; 2) circulates the qi and loosens constraint; relaxes the nerve; allays irritability and induces rest; 3) fosters the yin, resolves fever and induces rest; 4) restores the liver, stomach and pancreas; dredges the kidney and promotes urination, strengthens the eyes and benefits vision; 5) Activates immunity and restrains infection; antidotes poison, clears parasites and promotes tissue repair

Applications:  
Maceration: Soak 2 tsp of the chopped, preferably fresh root for 8-10 hours in a cup of cold water. Use as a sedating brew for anxiety and insomnia. Add 2-3 crops of peppermint water to disguise the flavor.

INFUSION: Use for anxiety and insomnia. Drinking a tea made with 1-2 tsp of dried valerian shortly before bedtime will promote sleepiness or use capsules

TINCTURE: use as a sedative or for insomnia. The dosage can vary considerably with individuals: 2 to 5 ml may be required, but in some people this can cause headaches, so start with low doses of 1-2 ml. Combine with licorice and other expectorants such as hyssop for coughs. Can be added to mixtures for high blood pressure where tension or anxiety is a contributory factor

COMPRESS: Soak a pad in the tincture to ease muscle cramps.

WASH: Use the infusion or maceration for chronic ulcers and wounds, and for drawing splinters.

BATH: Place 4 Tbsp dried valerian root and 12 Tbsp chamomile flowers into a large jar and pour ½ pint boiling white wine vinegar over them. Secure the lid and shake several times a day for fourteen days. Strain and bottle. Use about one cupful per bath. The ingredients induce a calm, relaxed state which ensures sound sleep.

SLEEP TINCTURE: 1 part hops, 1 part skullcap, 1 part motherwort, 1 part passion flower, 1 part St. Johns Wort, 2 parts Valerian root. Take 25-50 drops of tincture one-half hour before bedtime and take again if you awaken in the night and you want to sleep more.

HYPERACTIVITY TINCTURE: 1 tsp tincture of valerian rhizome; ½ tsp each tinctures of catnip leaves and passionflower leaves; ¼ tsp each tinctures of peppermint leaves and linden flowers. Combine ingredients. For a 50-pound child, give half a dropperful several times a day.

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE TEA: 1 quart boiling water, 1 tsp each hawthorn berries and flowers, ginger rhizome, valerian root and motherwort leaves. Pour boiling water over the herbs and steep for 20 minutes. Strain herbs. Drink at least 2 cups a day or make into a tincture.

Aromatherapy: The essential oil of valerian is closely related to whale and porpoise oil and oxidized animal fats and secretions.
CHARACTERISTICS: 1) an olive to brown liquid (darkening with age) with a warm-woody, balsamic, musky odor; a green top note in fresh oils; extraction: essential oil by steam distillation from the rhizomes. 2. An olive-brown viscous liquid with a balsamic-green, woody bitter-sweet strong odor; an absolute by solvent extraction of the rhizomes.

DOSHA EFFECT: V K-, P+
TASTE: bitter, pungent, sweet astringent
ENERGY: heating
BLENDs WELL WITH: patchouli, eucalyptus, wintergreen, juniper, tea tree, costus, oakmoss, pine, lavender, cedarwood, mandarin, petitgrain and rosemary.

OTHER USES: Very minute amounts actually produce pleasing scents for soap and after-shave fragrances. The roots were used in the 17th and 18th centuries to scent clothing. Oil used to flavor tobacco, root beer, liqueurs and apple flavorings.

Toxicity: Do not take for more than 2-3 weeks without a break, as continual use or high doses may lead to headaches, muscle spasms and heart palpitations. Valerian enhances the action of alcohol and sleep-inducing drugs, so avoid if taking this type of medication. Do not confuse with the garden plant, red “American” valerian which has no medicinal properties. Avoid during pregnancy.

Homeopathic: Homeopaths use valerian for hysteria, hysterical spasms, hysterical flatulence, hallucinations at night, earache from exposure to cold, sciatica, jerking of the extremities, and long-lasting fevers, and also for children’s afflictions such as the vomiting of curdled milk, diarrhea with lumps of coagulated milk and much screaming.

Recipes:
Valerian Flowers, Kiwi Fruit and Passion Fruit Salad
2 passion fruit
3 Tbsp apple juice
3 kiwi fruit, peeled and sliced
1 Tbsp valerian flowers
Halve the passion fruits and scoop the pulp into a serving bowl. Add the apple juice and kiwi. Mix gently and sprinkle the valerian flowers on top. (Good Enough to Eat)

Baked Bananas with Valerian Flowers
8 bananas, peeled
¼ oz butter
1 Tbsp brown sugar
1 Tbsp sherry
2 Tbsp valerian flowers
Preheat oven to 350F. Slice the bananas and place in an ovenproof dish, slice the butter and put it over the top. Sprinkle over the sugar and pour on the tablespoon of sherry. Sprinkle half of the flowers over the bananas, cover and put in the oven for 15-20 minutes until the bananas have become soft. Remove from the oven and scatter the remaining tablespoon of valerian flowers over the bananas. Serve with crème fraîche or double cream. (Good Enough to Eat)

References:
The Element Encyclopedia of 5000 Spells, Judika Illes, Harper Collins, 2004
Park’s Success with Herbs, Gertrude B. Foster and Rosemary F. Louden, Geo W Park Seed, 1980
The Illustrated Herb Encyclopedia, Kathi Keville, Mallard Press, 1991
The Energetics of Western Herbs, Peter Holmes, Artemis Press, 1989
The Natural Beauty Book, Anita Guyton, Thorsons, 1991

Resources:
Companion Plants, www.companionplants.com
Crimson Sage,; http://www.crimson-sage.com
Plants