LETUCE, WILD

*Lactuca virosa*
[lak-TOO-kuh vir-OH-suh]

**Family:** Compositae


**Description:** Annual/Biennial; Prickly lettuce is a tall plant, growing between two and four feet high, of a blue-green color with a whitish bloom. The stem is erect and branched. The lower leaves are quite large, and they may be unlobed or deeply notched, with toothed margins. The bases of these leaves clasp the stem. The midribs are set with numerous weak prickles, and these are present on the lower stems as well. The leaves on the upper stems are much smaller and delicately arched. Their bases tightly clasp the stems. A bitter, strong-smelling, sticky white sap flows abundantly when the plant is broken. Prickly lettuce flowers during July and August in the Northeast. The flowers are light yellow and resemble miniature dandelions. The seed heads are white and fluffy. In sunny areas, the leaves twist at the base and face east to west, with their edges pointing due north and south. This explains the name Compass Plant, by which it has been known since classical times. Height: 1.8; It is a biennial herb growing to a maximum height of 6 feet. The erect stem, springing from a brown tap-root, is smooth and pale green, sometimes spotted with purple. There are a few prickles on the lower part and short horizontal branches above. The numerous, large, radical leaves are from 6 to 18 inches long, entire, and obovate-oblong. The stem leaves are scanty, alternate, and small, clasping the stem with two small lobes. The heads are numerous and shortly-stalked, the pale-yellow corolla being strap-shaped. The rough, black fruit is oval, with a broad wing along the edge, and prolonged above into a long, white beak carrying silvery tufts of hair. The whole plant is rich in a milky juice that flows freely from any wound. This has a bitter taste and a narcotic odor. When dry, it hardens, turns brown, and is known as lactucarium.

**Cultivation:** Prefers well-drained to dry, alkaline soil in sun. Seed - sow spring or autumn in situ and only just cover the seed. Germination is usually fairly quick. Collect wild lettuce soon after the rosette appears, in early spring, when it’s tender and mild. Latex is extracted from leaves and stems of flowering plants in summer and dried for use as lactucarium and in extracts, infusions, tablets, and tinctures.

**History:** Prickly lettuce has been cultivated for centuries. The Greeks and Romans loved to eat
it, and it was a popular “sallet” green during the Middle Ages. Wild lettuce was called *Lactuca* virosa from the Latin word meaning “milky.” The leaves were reputedly thirst quenching, and the sap was believed to have a soothing, sleep producing effect and special curative powers. The Roman Emperor Augustus became convinced that a medicine of lettuce saved his life when he lay near death, and in gratitude and admiration he caused a statue and altar to be erected in the plant’s honor. In Assyrian herbal medicine, lettuce seeds were reportedly used with cumin as a poultice for the eyes. The name *lactuca* is derived from the classical Latin name for the milky juice, *virosa*, or ‘poisonous.’ All lettuces possess some of this narcotic juice, *Lactuca virosa* having the most, and the others in the following order: *L. scariola*, or Prickly Lettuce, *L. altissima*, *L. Canadensis*, or Wild Lettuce of America, and *L. sativa*, or Garden Lettuce. Cultivation has lessened the narcotic properties of the last, but it is still used for making a lotion for the skin useful in sunburn and roughness. The Ancients held the lettuce in high esteem for its cooling and refreshing properties.

**Constituents:** the latex known as lactucarium contains lactucopicrin, lactucerin, lactucone, lactucin and lactucic acid. The leaves contain in addition traces of a mydriatic alkaloid, flavonoids and coumarins.

**Medicinal Uses:** The drug resembles a feeble opium without its tendency to upset the digestive system. It is used to a small extent as a sedative and narcotic. Dissolved in wine it is said to be a good anodyne. It’s said that twenty-three out of twenty-four cases of dropsy were cured by taking doses of 18 grains to 3 drachms of extract in twenty-four hours. It is used in Germany for this complaint, but combined with more active drugs. It is said to be also a mild diaphoretic and diuretic, easing colic, inducing sleep and allaying cough. Water distilled from lettuce (*eau de laitre*) is sometimes used as a cataplasm. Dosages of powder, 10 to 20 grains or more. Of tincture, 30 to 60 drops. Of alcoholic extract, 1 to 5 grains. Of fluid extract, 5 to 20 grains. Of fluid extract, ¼ to 1 drachm. Of syrup, U.S.P., 2 drachms. Tincture, U.S.P., 30 drops.

Wild Lettuce helps to calm restlessness and reduce anxiety; it also helps to induce sleep for those experiencing insomnia. It has a sedative effect on the respiratory system, beneficial for whooping cough and nervous/dry/irritating coughs. It may also help to relieve birth pains, headaches, and muscle/joint pains. Calms overactivity or overstimulation and excitability in children. It is also taken to treat coughs, often combined with herbs such as licorice. Wild lettuce is thought to lower the libido and may also be used to relieve pain.

Combines well with Prunusin irritable coughs: with *Humulus, Scutellaria, Cypripedium* and *Passiflorain insomnia and with Dioscoreaand Cimicifugaforg rheumatic pains*. The tea is cooling and diaphoretic. People use the infusion for gastric spasms, fevers, and insomnia, and apply the sap to rashes, warts and acne. Lactucarium is not easily powdered, and is only slightly soluble in boiling water, though it softens and becomes plastic.

**Preparation:** The easiest method is to dry the leaves and roots and smoke them in a large pipe. The commercial technique is to heat (not boil) the leaf in water for at least an 8 hour period. Then remove the liquid Lactucarine goes into solution with water. A heat lamp is placed over the bowl of liquid and a fan is used to drive the water out of the extraction. The result will be a blackish gum which can be smoked best with a waterpipe and hot torch. The gum should be rolled in small balls and sealed in plastic to prevent them from drying out. The hotter the flame, the better.

**Toxicity:** In large quantities, may cause drowsiness and can repress sex drive.
Cosmetic Uses: The juice from the stems makes an astringent skin lotion. It removes blemishes and soreness caused by sunburn or wind, leaving the face soft and smooth.

Complexion Milk: Dissolve the juice of the whole plant in a ½ pint of hot water in a saucepan; let cool. The water should be thick and milky. Apply to the face and to any part made sore by sun or drying winds, to leave the skin soft and smooth and to take away soreness.

Ritual Uses: The Hopi smoked the dried resin, or sap, obtained from the plant. The flower would be cut off and the sap that ran from the stem would be collected. Each day, for a few weeks, another tiny bit was cut from the stem and more sap collected. This sap was then air-dried and later smoked in ritual. (Similar effects are achieved with the dried leaves.) The Hopi believe that induced dream states contain more information about reality than the conscious waking state. Wild lettuce, aka lettuce opium, is said to enhances the vividness of dreams when smoked prior to sleep.

A modern method is to dry the leaves and roots and smoke them. And another technique is to heat, not boil, the leaf in water for at least eight hours and then remove the liquid. The lactucaraine (active chemical) goes into the water solution. Once the water is evaporated, the result will be a black gum that is often smoked. The resin should be sealed in plastic to prevent it from drying out. An effective dose is generally about 1 ounce of wild lettuce or about 1/2 gram of the extract per person.

Culinary Uses: Use the leaves like dandelions or chicory, raw or cooked. They soon become bitter, and you’ll have to boil them in several changes of water to make them palatable. A mild oil, used in cooking, is said to be obtained from the seeds in Egypt.

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