PLANTAIN

Pharmaceutical Name: Herba Plantaginis majoris

Description: The greater plantain is usually perennial and survives the winter by means of its short rootstock set with long fibrous roots. The five to seven-veined leaves are all arranged in a basal rosette that lies flat on the ground. Each plant grows long, upright or ascending flower stems carrying cylindrical spikes densely covered with flowers. The yellow anthers hang conspicuously from the small yellowish-green flowers to facilitate wind pollination. The style protrudes from the flower long before flowering to prevent self-pollination. The outer coat of the small seeds swells up and becomes sticky when moistened, so they are readily distributed by man and animal. It blooms from May to August.

Cultivation: Common plantain a perennial to zone 2 and native to Europe and temperate regions of Asia. Rarely cultivated, it is normally picked from the wild. If cultivated it is propagated by seed and prefers slightly rich, moist ground in full sun or partial shade. Divisions can also be used. Spacing should be 12 inches in the row and the rows spaced at 24-30 inches. Weed heavily when young and continue to cultivate when needed. The leaves are gathered throughout the summer before flowering. Two to four harvests are possible annually starting in the second year. Cut the leaves with pruning shears. A yield of 2,000 pounds of dry herb per acre is possible. Plantain turns brown easily so dry it immediately. It dries easily in 3-7 days.

 Constituents: Contains iridoids (such as aucubin), flavonoids (including apigenin), monoterpene alkaloids, glycosides, sugars, triterpenes, linoleic acid, tannins, iroids, silica,
plant acids, and mucilage. Aucubin increases uric acid excretion by the kidneys; apigenin is anti-inflammatory. Plantain provides beta carotene and calcium.

**Properties:** leaves are relaxing expectorant, tonify mucous membranes, reduce phlegm, antispasmodic, topically healing, diuretic, alterative, astringent, refrigerant, vulnerary

**History:** In Gaelic, this herb is known as “the healing plant” because it was used in Ireland to treat wounds and bruises. It is a plant that has accompanied European colonization around the world—some Native Americans called it “Englishman’s foot” because it seemed to spring up in the footsteps of white settlers. Plantain is one of the plants mentioned in the Saxon ‘nine herbs charm’. The Latin name *plantago* was derived from the word *planta* meaning “sole of the foot, alluding to the resemblance between the shape of the leaves and that part of the body. Another version is that plantain is the Old French version of the Latin *plantago* meaning “plant.” It was called waybread because it commonly bred by the wayside. The leechbooks mention it frequently and recommend its use for more than 20 different ailments, including one affliction for which the use of Plantain is advised “in case a man’s body be hard.” The Anglo-Saxons used it to treat smallpox. Chaucer referred to it and Shakespeare mentions it in his plays. In France, to ensure their immunity before attacking a viper, weasels were said to roll in clumps of plantain. Farmers planted it for their sheep to graze on. The gelatinous matter obtained from soaking the seedhead was once used to stiffen muslin.

To stop vomiting, the patient was fed a cake made with plantain seeds, egg yolk, add flour. Mixed with oil of roses, plantain juice was rubbed on the temples and forehead and “helped lunatic persons very much”. Canaries and many little wildbirds are quite fond of the ripe seeds of plantain. Bunches of seed spikes used to be hung in birdcages and wild birds can frequently be observed feasting on the seeds. This habit may well account for the custom of calling Plantain cuckoo bread in Devonshire; it was believed that once every seven years, the plantain changed into a cuckoo and flew away.

Trotula, a healer and midwife, advised using plantain to treat uterine hemorrhages and insisted that it can restore “the very essence of a woman” to the extent that it could give a woman the appearance of being a virgin.

**Energetics:** slightly sweet, salty, and bitter; cool, mainly drying

**Meridians/Organs affected:** bladder, small intestine, gall bladder

**Medicinal uses:** Common plantain quickly staunches blood flow and encourages the repair of damaged tissue. It may be used instead of comfrey in treating bruises and broken bones. An ointment or lotion may be used to treat hemorrhoids, fistulae and ulcers. Taken internally, common plantain is diuretic, expectorant, and decongestant. It is commonly prescribed for gastritis, peptic ulcers, diarrhea, dysentery, irritable bowel syndrome, respiratory congestion, loss of voice and urinary tract bleeding. The seeds are closely related to psyllium seeds and can be used similarly, a tablespoon or two soaked in hot sweetened water or fruit juice until a mucilage is formed and the whole gruel drunk as a lubricating laxative. The fresh juice can be made into a douche for vaginitis by combining two tablespoons and a pint of warm water with a pinch of table salt. Proteolytic enzymes found in the fresh leaf and the fresh or dried root make plantain useful as a gentle internal vasoconstrictor for milk intestinal inflammation. The fresh juice or dried leaves in tea can help bladder inflammations. The fresh juice can be preserved with 25% vodka or 10% grain alcohol. Take one teaspoon in warm water one hour before every meal for mild stomach ulcers. For bed-wetting plantain leaf can be given as a beverage-strength tea throughout the day (but not right before bedtime).

Plantain roots are an old-time cure for toothaches. Fresh, the roots used to be chewed,
dried and powdered and placed in a hollow
tooth as a painkiller. The Chippewa used
plantain leaves to draw out splinters from
inflamed skin, and as vulnerary poultices.
They favored the fresh leaves, spreading the
surface of these with bear grease before
applying them and renewing the poultices when
the leaves became dry or too heated.
Sometimes they replaced the bear grease with
finely chopped fresh roots, or else applied the
chopped roots directly to the wound. For
winter use, they greased fresh leaves and
tightly wrapped stacks of them in leather. The
Iroquois used the fresh leaves to treat wounds,
as well as coughs, colds, and bronchitis. The
Shoshone applied poultices made from the
entire plant to battle bruises, while the
Meskawaki treated fevers with a tea made from
the root.

Traditional Chinese medicine uses
plantain to treat urinary problems, dysentery,
hepatitis and lung problems, especially asthma
and bronchitis. The seeds are used for bowel
ailments. Plantain is also found in African and
southeast Asian folk medicine. Research in
India has shown its beneficial effects in treating
coughs and colds.

Navajo Uses: The root of plantain is
one of the life medicines. The plant is used to
treat many internal problems: indigestion,
stomachache, heartburn, venereal disease, and
loss of appetite. It is also a diuretic.

REMEDIES: for yeast infections ripe plantain
seeds can be gathered from the seed stalks in
late summer, dried and stored in a jar. Soak
them in a small amount of boiled water. The
seeds will form a gel which can be gently
placed onto inflamed labia to help reduce
itching and swelling and heal open sores.
JUICE: Press from fresh leaves. Take 10 ml,
three times a day, for inflamed mucous
membranes in cystitis, diarrhea and lung
infections
TINCTURE: Make from fresh leaves if
possible. Good for heavy mucus, as in allergic
rhinitis, or if astringency is needed
POULTICE: apply fresh leaves to bee stings
and slow-healing wounds
OINTMENT: apply to wounds, burns and
hemorrhoids
WASH: use the juice for inflammations, sores
and wounds
GARGLE: Use the diluted juice for sore
throats and mouth or gum inflammations
SYRUP: Take a syrup made from the juice for
coughs, particularly if the throat is sore of
inflamed.

Revitalizing Green Juice:
1 cups fresh plantain leaves
1 cup pure liquid honey

Crush the leaves in a food processor,
and squeeze in cheesecloth. Combine 1
cup of the green juice with the honey and
and simmer for 10 minutes at low heat, stirring
regularly. Let cool and pour into an opaque
bottle. Take this nectar 1 spoonful at a time
like a syrup to treat a cough, sore throat, fatigue
and eczema. 1 Tbsp 3 times daily.

Tonic for Bites, Poison Ivy
½ cup chopped plantain
½ cup chopped lemon balm
½ cup chopped comfrey leaves
½ cup chopped borage leaves
4 cup boiling water
4 cups witch hazel

Make herb water: Combine herbs in
a large pot with a lid. Pour boiling water over,
and cover with lid. Allow to stand 15 minutes.
Strain liquid into sterilized jar, seal and store in
refrigerator. Herb water keeps up to 3 weeks.
Make tonic: Mix 1/4 cup of herb water and ½
cup witch hazel. Store in refrigerator. Rub
afflicted skin liberally with cotton dipped in
tonic or soak swatches of cotton in tonic and
lay over skin. Reapply as often as required.
(Recipes from Riversong)

HOMEOPATHIC USES: Plantago major is
used for earache, toothache, and eye pain due
to tooth decay or ear infection. Pyorrhea,
depression, and insomnia are treated by it. It
causes an aversion to tobacco.

Cosmetic Uses:
PLANTAIN NIGHT CREAM:
Fill a saucepan with the leaves and add the juice of a lemon and 1 pint of water. Simmer for 20 minutes, strain and when cool, add a fluid ounce of witch hazel. Bottle and keep under refrigeration.

Ritual Uses: Plantain, an herb of Venus, was an important element in numerous charms and love divinations. A rite of great antiquity was two flowering stalks of plantain were picked to represent the man and woman in question. The fluffy blossoms were carefully removed, and both stalks were wrapped in a dock leaf and laid under a stone. The next morning the stalks were unwrapped. If both stalks bore new blossoms, there would be real love between the man and woman; if only one stalk bore flowers, there would be unrequited love. Plantain has a compassionate stability that finds opportunity for growth in every situation. It’s hung in the home and the car as an herb of protection.

For the old Germans, plantain embodied those souls who still sought the light after entering the Underworld. The ancient Greeks and Romans also believed in Plantain’s connection to these powers. The following is a spell from the 11th century marking plantain’s position as a plant of the Roman god Orcus and his daughter Proserpina goddess of death.

“Plantain, herb of Proserpina, Daughter of King Orcus! As you have made infertile the mule, So may you also shut the wave of blood from this woman’s womb!” The best time of year to gather plants for amulets is between August 15th and September 8th (Women’s Thirty Days).

Navajo Uses: It is used in the prayers for protection in the Deer Way and is also smoked for a ceremonial tobacco. The stalk is a ceremonial lighter.

Culinary Uses:
This is a plant which should be picked very young, and, if cooked, it should be done thoroughly as it tends to be tough. The leaves have a nutty flavor, similar to Swiss chard and a small quantity of delicate central leaves may be used, finely chopped in a mixed or rice salad. The strong leaf fibers can easily be removed after boiling the herb which greatly improves its palatability. It is high in vitamins C, A. and K. The seeds, which contain protein, have a nut-like flavor and were ground and made into breads, usually mixed with flowers. Early Australian settlers used plantain seeds to substitute for sago in puddings. Aborigines made a kind of porridge from shade plantain.

Recipes:

Chicken and Plantain Cream
8 oz young plantain leaves
2 oz butter
1 ½ lb raw chicken, diced in small pieces
2 oz walnuts
salt and ground black pepper
½ pint double cream

Wash the plantain leaves, having discarded any tough stems, put in boiling salted water and cook until tender. Drain well and chop. Melt the butter in a frying pan and toss the chicken in it until it begins to color. Roughly chop the walnuts and add them with the plantain leaves to the pan and cook together for a further 5 to 8 minutes. Season, then add the double cream, scraping up and amalgamating it with the buttery juices. Stir for 5 minutes or so until the cream thickens. Service with plain boiled potatoes or rice and a green vegetable. (Food from the Countryside)

Plantain with Baked Eggs
For each serving allow 2 oz plantain leaves, 1 Tbsp double cream, a knob of butter, salt, pepper, a little nutmeg and an egg. Boil the chopped plantain leaves until tender, drain well and mix with a very little butter, half the cream, salt and pepper. Put in the bottom of a lightly-buttered ramekin. Break an egg on top of the plantain, spoon over the rest of the cream and sprinkle with nutmeg. Bake in a moderate oven until the eggs are set to your liking. Serve with fingers of hot brown toast. (Food from the Countryside)

Plantain Seed—Quinoa Pilaf
2 cups water
1 cup quinoa
¼ cup common plantain seed capsules
2 Tbsp finely chopped fresh basil or 2 tsp dried basil
1 clove garlic
1 tsp sea salt, or to taste
1 Tbsp olive oil

Bring the water to a boil and add the quinoa and plantain seeds. When the grains are fluffy turn off the heat and add the remaining ingredients. Let sit 5 minutes before serving.

Identifying and Harvesting Edible and Medicinal Plants in Wild (and Not So Wild) Places

Wild Plantain Cookies
2 cups whole wheat flour
¾ cup plantain seeds (dried or fresh)
4 Tbsp baking powder
2 Tbsp molasses
½ cup carob covered raisins

Mix all ingredients well in a big bowl. Add tepid water to slowly form a thick, claylike paste. To form cookies, roll a pinch of dough between your palms and press onto a greased cookie sheet. Bake 15 minutes at 350F or until golden brown. (The Herbal Connection Collection)

References:
The Herbal Connection Collection, Maureen Rogers & Patricia Sulick, 1994


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